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FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS



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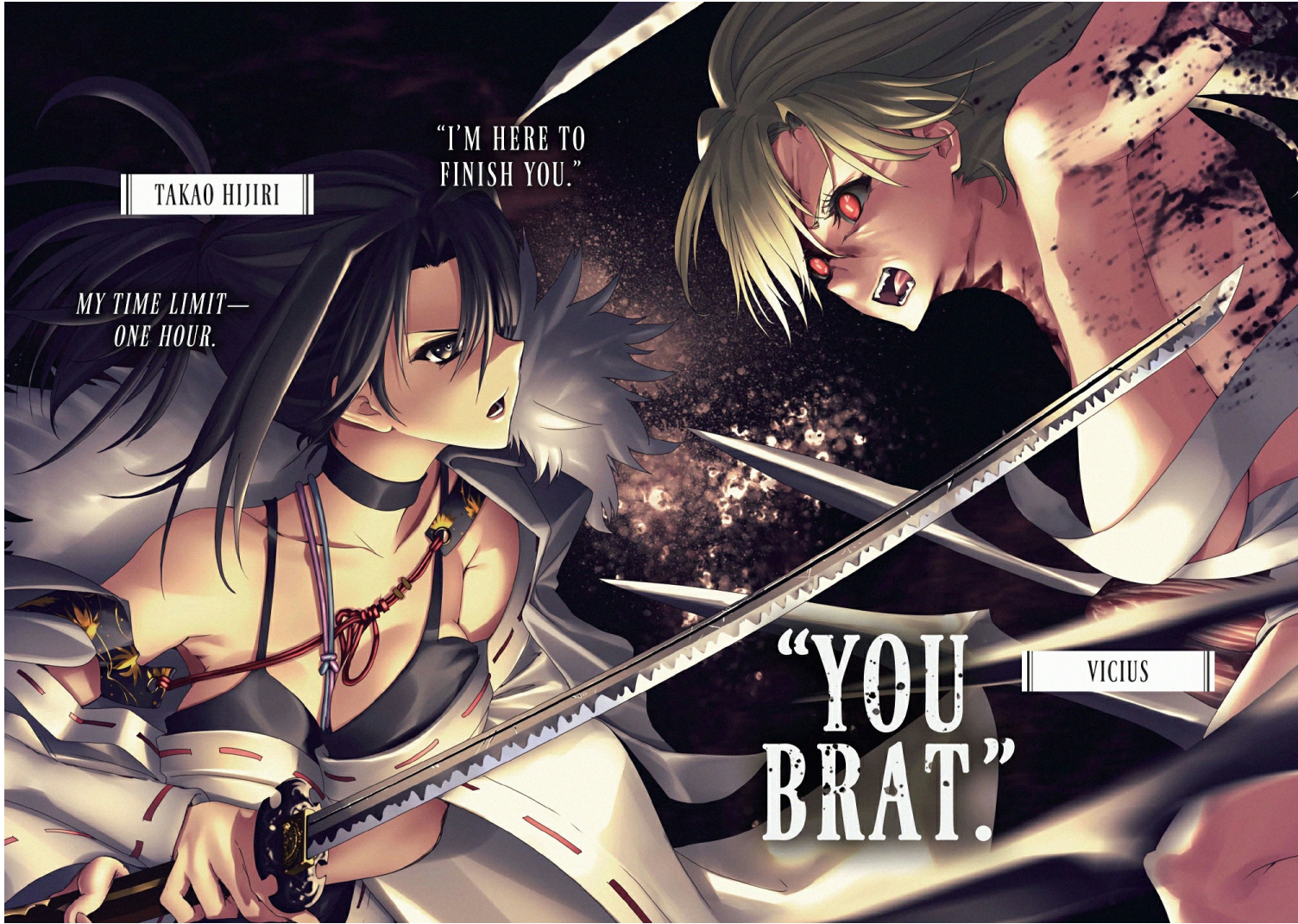
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SERAS ASHRAIN



When I woke up, the room was still dark.

I looked to my side and saw Seras asleep, slumped over the desk like she'd dropped off in the middle of an all-night study session.



TAKAO HIJIRI

MY TIME LIMIT—
ONE HOUR.

“I’M HERE TO
FINISH YOU.”

“YOU
BRAT.”

VICIUS

SILVER WORLD



FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS



WRITTEN BY
KAORU SHINOZAKI

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 8

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Prologue

THE FOLLOWING EVENTS took place before Yasu Tomohiro and the Sixth Order of Knights had departed Alion...

The Goddess Vicius had summoned the captain of the Sixth Order to her office.

But...he's late.

Vicius sat motionless, her smile never faltering. Eventually, there was a hesitant knock from outside.

"You've kept me waiting, Johndoe."

The door opened slowly, revealing no one standing on the other side.

"I apologize."

"Oh?!" Vicius turned to look in the direction of his voice, which mysteriously came from a place 5 meters to her right. "How did you get there?"

"It seems that I can only be detected when close to a target."

"My, my... ♪ Another wonderful and strange ability you've developed." Vicius sounded impressed. "Nonetheless, I called you here today because I have a favor to ask."

"Have you finally discovered the location of the Country at the End of the World?"

"At long last. That sore loser, the Forbidden Witch, did rather complicate the search with all those false reports and tricks of hers... *Alas*. This has been ever so trying."

"The false tears are a bit unnecessary."

"How rude of you."

"I gather that you wish for us to join the Sword of Courage in dealing with the Forbidden Words Clan?"

“Why are you talking like that?”

“With my lack of...*individuality*, I have begun to forget myself of late. I decided to introduce a few formal quirks into my speech patterns.”

“It doesn’t suit you.”

“I tend to agree.”

“It’s unbecoming of you.”

“Then I shall stop.”

“But, well...” Vicius kept smiling and narrowed her eyes like a fox. “Now you’ve lost so much of your individuality, you’ve attained this mysterious ability to approach people unnoticed, I see?”

“It takes a great deal of concentration to do so.”

“Well, it is a fabulous new talent. ♪ Yet... Who *are* you, I wonder? You are not a descendant of heroic blood, are you?”

“I believe you are capable of determining that for yourself, Goddess...”

“Well, yes. I am a god after all.”

Nobody knew anything about the birth of the captain of the Sixth Order, Johndoe—nor even if his name was his real one. In the past, he had been a mercenary. While there was much that Vicius did not know about the man, one thing she knew for sure—he was absurdly strong.

“So it appears the Sword of Courage have located the Country at the End of the World... And you would like the Sixth Order to move to support them?”

“For now, yes. I’m sure they would kill plenty of demi-humans if left to their own devices. Oh, what a savage prospect...”

“That group of unstable and broken individuals is only kept together by the constant stream of new enemies. Keeping them on a leash must be quite difficult, Goddess.”

“They *are* quite an insane group of individuals. I believe it best to have them sent out on solo missions as often as circumstances permit.”

“If they gain entry to the Country at the End of the World, they will slaughter

those inside. Is this wise?"

"Tragic...but there's nothing to be done about that. I shall regret more the things I failed to do, than those I did."

"I don't think *they* will have any regrets."

Vicius's eyes softened. She placed a hand on her cheek and gave Johndoe a wry smile. "Perhaps not."

"Do you intend on cutting the Sword of Courage out eventually?"

"I have yet to say anything of the sort..."

"I can picture the broad strokes of your plans."

"*Heh heh...* Then, can you *finish* them?"

"It would not be impossible."

"Then once the Forbidden Words Clan have been quietly taken care of, please dispose of the Sword of Courage as well."

"Only the Forbidden Words Clan? Should we eradicate the people of the Country at the End of the World, too?"

"Wh-what makes you say such terrible things?! It would be such a waste to kill them all. But we must instill within them a certain degree of respect for the Thirteen Orders of Alion. Once that is accomplished they may become a valuable source of labor if properly managed." Vicius grinned, placing both hands together in front of her chest. "Let us use their fellow demi-humans to control them. That should keep everybody happy."

"And you are certain you wish for us to dispose of the Sword of Courage?" asked Johndoe again, his face devoid of emotion.

"...I did always think they were rather difficult to control. That was why I had them sent away from the others in the first place. Nggh...I do think they've rather served their purpose at this point. How unfortunate...for them."

"They might not be of much use in the war against the Demon King's armies, but in eliminating interference from other nations... Might they still have their uses?"

“If any should betray the Sacred Alliance, there may be a way to use them... Hmm... But you yourself have a strong dislike for the Sword of Courage, don’t you, Johndoe?”

“...”

“I think this will be a good opportunity to take them out of the picture, no...?”

“Well, yes... I have no affinity whatsoever for the Sword of Courage.”

“I thought as much. ♪” The Goddess yawned. “What awaits them at their destination is extermination—*killing*. But it is precisely by leaving people alive... The demi--humans are no exception in this.”

“Goddess, I would like to request a personal reward for carrying out this mission.”

“Eh? What kind of reward?”

“Men and women—four of each. Those blessed with good looks are preferable. Most important of all, I wish you to find me kind, good people with good reputations, of good character and standing. Those that are affable to all they meet. Those who are passionately in love with their spouses, building happy families together—I want them.”

“I have a feeling something terrible is about to happen... Oh my! It makes me shudder...” said the Goddess.

Johndoe ignored her and continued on without emotion. “I do not like killing good people, who have done nothing wrong. What would I gain from doing so? It’s exactly those good people, loved by all around them...”

His expression was flat.

“...that I wish to see fall.”

Vicius whimpered.

“Ohh... You’re so terribly cruel, Johndoe. You truly are heartless... I’ll start to detest you, if you continue like this. Oh, you frighten me so... Can’t you be rewarded with evil men and women instead?”

“Nothing about the fall of wicked people interests me.”

“Unthinkable...”

“It is the process of leaving people *mere shells of their former selves* that I desire. I apologize for being so direct, but I truly enjoy it. Seeing intimate lovers or warm and happy families collapse into tragedy... I simply cannot get enough of the spectacle. They fall, reduced to nothing, left to quarrel and inflict more hardship on those around them. Even though they used to be so content with each other, used to be such good people... I apologize, I have become too excited by the prospect.”

“*Oh ho ho*, it’s quite all right, you know? You sicken me, that is all.”

“To be perfectly honest... I wish for them to kill *themselves in the end*.”

Johndoe was a strange man. There was a hint of arousal in his voice, but his mask-like expression remained entirely blank and unchanged. “It would be such a shame to kill them. We should let them live to better observe their fall. Suicide is such a perfect end—it’s so beautiful. The most beautiful moment in the world. That’s why...”

Johndoe turned his emotionless eyes down to the floor. “The Sword of Courage are *not* beautiful.”

“Ahh, how scary you are...”

“In the past, I have made mistakes.”

“This conversation is dragging on, no...?” The Goddess yawned again.

“That dark elf village... The Shanatilis Clan, why...” For a moment, a rare flash of emotion was on Johndoe’s face. He bit his lower lip. “Why did I kill them all so quickly? I slaughtered them, nothing more.”

“If only Anaorbael had been among their number...”

“I was too young. It was a mistake that youth is prone to. I should have made them commit suicide, or driven them into a corner, forcing them to turn on each other in murderous rage. I still regret it to this day.”

“All you can do is try your best next time. Humans can learn from their past mistakes—and well, are we quite done with this topic? I understand you well enough and do sympathize.”

“Goddess.”

“Yes?”

“The heroes.”

“What of them?”

“My reward—I also wish for the Heroes from Another World,” he said, then quickly added, “...After the Demon King’s armies have been defeated, of course.”

“Hmph, who is it that you want?”

“Ayaka Sogou most of all... And Kobato Kashima...”

“Sogou-san you can have... But ahem, Kashima-san... Who *is* she again?”

“The Takao Sisters too if possible. I understand they are your favorites, so I have them placed further down my list. Though I also have my personal doubts about whether those two are truly good people, which is another reason they’re low on my list.”

“That rather depends. Who else?”

“With the addition of Kayako Suou—that should be enough.”

“Ah, Sogou-san’s friend isn’t she...? You’ve been closely watching them I take it? Been putting that disappearing trick of yours to good use spying on them, have you?”

“In a way, yes.”

“Well, speaking of heroes... There is an A-class named Tomohiro Yasu. I wish him to accompany your Sixth Order on its mission.”

“Understood. You may leave him in our hands. Incidentally... Do you intend on having the rumored Lord of the Flies Brigade join our cause as allies?”

“Indeed. I think they might be a suitable replacement for the Sword of Courage, even. As they defeated the Demon King’s First of the Sworn in battle, they are certainly no enemies of ours. Rather they appear to be allied with the Holy Empire of Neah. If we handle Cattlea Straumms correctly, I’m sure it will be possible to bring them over to our side.”

“Cattlea Straumms—the woman who was to be Civit Gartland’s wife, no?”

Vicius leaned back in her chair, causing the backrest to creak under the strain. “His fall came as a complete surprise. I had high hopes for him in the coming battles against the Demon King’s forces.”

“The loss of the Strongest Man in the World was that great to you, I see.”

A few moments passed in silence before Vicius directed her gaze at Johndoe once more. “Supposing you were to have fought him—do you believe you could have won?”

“This again? As I have told you, I would have never known unless I tried. Nor did I ever have any intention of doing so.”

“*Oh ho ho.*” Vicius brought her chair back to the table and leaned toward him. “You won’t say it, will you? Not even once.”

“Goddess?”

“You never claimed to be stronger than him. Unlike Lewin Seale, there is something unknowable about you.”

Johndoe was silent.

“Lewin Seale is full of talent, that I must admit. But I can see his limits. He is strong, but he can never surpass what Civit was. Yet...” Suddenly, Vicius was gone—nothing remained but an empty chair at a desk as she blinked back into existence in front of Johndoe. He didn’t flinch—didn’t move a muscle.

“Your limits...I cannot see.”

“You’re overestimating me.”

“What are you hiding, I wonder? It does so bother me. It won’t let me sleep—morning, noon, and night, I think of it. Come now, won’t you allow me to rest?”

“Do you know what the secret of Civit Gartland’s strength was?”

“Nobody knows that. Not even a Goddess such as I.”

“He had some of the blood of the divines in his veins, perhaps?”

“No.”

“Heroic blood?”

“No.”

“Nothing is known of it?”

“Nothing. ♪”

“In the Bakoss Empire, the secret of Civit’s strength was the topic of constant debate. There was a rumor that the mystery of his birth parents could be the key to solving all of it.”

“But nobody knows who Civit’s parents were—he was the adopted son of the House of Gartland, not of their blood. He lived alone before Bakoss took him in, it’s said. The man himself claimed to remember nothing of his birth parents...”

“His mother... Her family name was Einherjahl.”

“Eh?”

“It appears that Civit himself believed her to be dead...and I’m certain that it was *she herself* who told him as much.”

“Inconceivable.”

“His true name was Civit Einherjahl... Though he did not know that himself.” Johndoe spoke the name once more. “...Einherjahl was my mother’s family name too.”

“You two were brothers...?”

“Of different fathers, but yes.”

Vicius was lost in confusion for a moment. She stepped away from him, and Johndoe walked towards the door to leave.

“I haven’t the slightest bit of interest in taking the place of the Strongest Man in the World. I was terribly worried about rumors of my strength getting out. That is why I have said nothing of this. I do not wish to fight, nor have I any desire to kill. I wish only to witness sweet falls from grace brought about by my own hands—to force the truly good into despair and suicide. That, to my mind, is true evil...and true evil is best done in the darkness. What I should be is *anonymous*.”

Vicius thought for a moment.

If Johndoe's strength had become known, Civit would have found him—he would have become the man's worthy opponent. That was why he suppressed his personality, his presence, watered down his very being—all to avoid being detected by Civit. And now, some time since the Strongest Man in the World's death, he has developed the unique ability to completely prevent others from recognizing his presence.

Such a sudden change—just as it was with Civit Gartland himself.

As Johndoe walked to the door, Vicius questioned him one final time.

“You could have beaten him?”

“I would have never known—not unless I tried, Goddess.”

JOHNDOE

“ARE YOU SURE 'bout this, cap’?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“The First Order idiots are chargin’ ahead... But doesn’t look like any of the others are goin’ to back ’em up.”

“If Mira’s in the mix, we’re better off without him, I believe. The Commander of the Thirteen Orders of Alion Michaela Eucalyon is useless on the battlefield. The orders of Alion work best when they act independently.”

“Michaela’s no good, you got that right.”

“An incompetent ally is an asset to our enemies.”

“Guess this is the end for the First Order, huh.”

“I got them fired up before we set out—I always expected they would rush ahead like fools.”

“Damn, cap’... You’ve got ’em all in the palm of your hand!”

“They will be messaging us soon, I expect. They’ll need the Divine Beast Radice to open the door.”

“I was s’posed to meet up with them way sooner, right?”

“I saw no sense in sending you forward into a battle with such high mortality rates. It will be difficult to open that door without you. It seemed wise to keep you with

us, for the time being. I sent a friendly message over to Michaela to inform him as much.”

“Broke your promise, huh? Our cap’ has a mean streak, I knew it.”

“It will make it easier for us to stay flexible, depending on how the First Order’s advance progresses. They are disposable pawns.”

“Still cap’n, you really think this Wildly Beautiful Emperor of Mira’s a threat to us?”

“Given that he has rebelled against the Goddess, he must believe himself to have some prospects of victory. We cannot afford to be complacent.”

“Y’think?”

“If we are capable of taking him out here, we should do so. There is the reward to think of as well.”

“What kinda reward?”

Johndoe held out his index finger—the blade of his shortsword balanced atop it, perfectly still.

“The one they call ‘*class rep*’... Of all the good people I have seen in my life, I believe she is the *best*.”

Chapter 1:

Engage

“SO THAT IS WHAT you’ve been doing behind my back,” said the dragonkin Cocoroniko Doran, upon

learning of the plot against Liselotte Onik. “The other Four Shining Warriors were aware, I take it?”

“Well... You woulda been on Liselotte’s side no matter what, right?”

Niko shot a glare in Geo’s direction. “Of course. As I’m sure you’re all perfectly well aware, I owe the prime minister a great deal.”

“Even if Lise’s ideas are wrong?” Geo sighed—he sounded exasperated.

“I have never gone against the prime minister’s wishes, that much is true. And yet, after hearing you all speak today, it is also the case that I feel some remorse for not being a little more questioning of her. Well...” She fixed

me with a reptilian stare. “...If the prime minister insists that we follow your directions, then I suppose I must oblige.”

“Yes, if you please, Niko,” said Lise. She had been treated for her injuries now, and there were bandages wrapped around her face.

I snorted at Cocoroniko’s remarks. “Glad this got settled so quickly. Do you mind if I call you Niko?”

“It matters not. Call me whatever you like.”

I sat in a circle with the rest of the Four Shining Warriors. With the Thirteen Orders of Alion closing in, we had to decide on our strategy as quickly as possible. Seras and Slei galloped back towards us from their scouting mission.

“How does the area look?”

“There are still no signs of the other knights,” Seras replied.

“The others seem awfully late in getting here, don’t they?” I looked down at Michaela’s corpse. “This guy was the Commander of the Thirteen Orders of

Alion—but it's like the other orders barely tried to support him.”

“Indeed, to think the rest would be so far from his advance...”

I told the others much of the information I had gotten from Michaela before I betrayed him, including the fact that the other knights would be here soon.

But now, I'm starting to doubt that. Before this mission started, Slei and I went scouting the area and caught sight of a group of knights up on a hill, far off in the distance. They could have been here earlier, but it seemed they must have stayed put. The First Order were the only ones that came charging in.

“You think maybe they saw what was happenin' to these guys and beat feet?” Kil asked.

“...Or maybe they were used,” mused Lise.

Amia turned her head to the side. “What do you mean by *used*? Explain it so that even Amia Plum Lynx can understand, will you?”

“Just as I was used by Belzegea-san as a decoy... The First Order may have been thrown into battle as disposable pawns in order to test our strength. D-do you think that is a possibility, perhaps?”

Lise looked up at me, a little timid to be speaking out.

Is she losing confidence in the things she says? There's something strange about the way she worded that too.

I placed a hand on the chin of my mask. “...If that's the case, I get the feeling they sent these guys way too far ahead.”

If they planned on using the First Order as decoys from the start, they would've needed to be in position to follow through—preparing an ambush as we did, or something similar. Even if they were nothing more than disposable pawns to test our strength, they should've sent scouts to watch the fighting. But the leopardmen I put in place haven't noticed any movement. It's possible they have someone who's incredibly good at concealing their presence, I suppose...



Geo looked like he was about to speak but swallowed the words instead.

“Geo? Something on your mind?”

“...Nah. Too ridiculous to even think about.”

“You were thinking the other knights set up the First Order to die?”

Geo looked shocked, the others too.

Looks like he came to the exact same conclusion I did. In fact, I'd been thinking about that pattern. The First Order were intentionally isolated—or at least, we can't discount that as a possibility.

Amia spread her hands out wide. “B-but...they're on the same side, yeah? And like, I heard that Michaela guy say he is supposed to be their commander? Then...”

“Perhaps Michaela was getting in their way.”

“I-in their way...?”

“I don't know, but there must be someone in the other orders who thought they'd be better off with Michaela dead. It's even possible *all* the other knight orders felt the same... Either way, it makes the most sense to think that these guys were sent in to test our strength. At least for now, anyway.”

Not to mention that I quietly killed the messengers the First Order were sending back to the rest. If those messages got through, the other orders might already be on us.

Seras looked towards the entrance to the valley path. “The Thirteen Orders of Alion are still difficult foes to properly assess.”

“We're crushing the Sixth Order though. By any means necessary.”

“Understood,” Seras answered me immediately. I could sense the rage burning silently in her chest—I felt the exact same way.

The group that attacked Lis's village—I'm going to kill them, no matter what.

“It's also convenient for us that the rest of the orders aren't attacking immediately—it gives us some time to plan. Lise, Geo.”

“Eh? Y-yes, what is it?”

“Yeah?”

I unfurled my map of the area.

“The other day I went ahead of you all and checked out the area, looking for the places that would be best to fight in. If we’re going to be fighting mounted knights, we should try to cut down on their advantages where possible.”

“You’re the one who made this map?” asked Lise.

“Well, no. Seras drew it all out.”

“...The information here is practically identical to my own knowledge of the area, you know.”

I pointed to an area I’d marked. “This is rocky terrain, but it’d be a good place for an ambush—”

I went on to discuss how we should fight, and our troop placements, while describing more of the battlefield’s features. I also explained the route I expected the enemy to advance down. Seras chimed in with more tactical information where necessary.

“But of course, we can’t expect everything to happen as I’ve just described it. On the field we’ll need to use messengers and sound spheres to deal with the situation as it unfolds and stay flexible with how we respond.”

Seras scrutinized the map closely, pointing to several places with her fingertip.

“As a countermeasure against the knights... It would be best to set up fences or palings in these areas. But it’s going to be difficult to find the time to do so,” she said, before giving me a questioning glance.

“Yeah, you’re right... I wouldn’t want us to get attacked while we’re still constructing defenses.”

No time for setting up any large-scale traps either, for much the same reason.

“You’ve got the spears and shields ready, right?”

Early in the morning I had Geo and the others bring them out and stash them

somewhere hidden near the valley path. I sent a group of strong soldiers from the Band of the Shining Dragon to retrieve them.

There's not quite enough time for preparing fences and palings, but these weapons are close by.

“Add in our archers... We're going to be taking out all the knights and archer knights that charge at us with these forces. And the Band of the Shining Horse can provide some support as a magic force.”

The blue-skinned Mail Clan... Seems like they're the only ones who have enough magic users to make up a full squad, so they're going to be important in the upcoming battle. I hear it's rare for demi-humans to be so capable of manipulating mana. Eve wasn't that good at it either. I'm sure the reason humans have such power on the continent has a lot to do with how many of them are capable of using magic...

“As for our messengers... I want to assign the harpies to that role in the rear guard.”

Amia raised a hand. “But won't that make them easy targets for arrows and magic attacks?”

“Exactly. It's great that they can fly, but that also makes them stand out. That's why I'm stationing them only in the rear, so it'll be harder for the enemy to find them and shoot them down.”

“Ah, I see... Yep.”

It's a great advantage that they can traverse the area without having to work around the terrain, but I'm still keeping them behind our front lines. I've no intention of thinning their numbers by sending them out on scouting missions.

“What about the front lines?”

“I want leopardmen handling messages at the front. They're best at moving undetected, and they're fast. We'll be fighting on the borders of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters—we might even end up having to stray in there at times. The leopardmen are best suited for that as well.”

Not to mention their strength in combat makes them the easy pick to take the

front.

“I want the centaurs filling in that gap between the front and rear lines, making good use of that mobility of yours.”

Kil folded her arms under her chest and puffed it up, giving me a captivating smile. “Leave it to us. ♪”

“Oh, and—Kil?”

“Eh?”

“I want to leave command of this whole battle to you.”

Everyone looked to Kil, who pointed at herself in disbelief. “M-me?”

“From what I’ve seen, you’re calm and have good self-control in battle. You’re smart, too. You showed me how good a leader you are in the fight earlier.”

“I’m happy to hear that, but... Y-you sure you aren’t overestimating me?” Kil said modestly, but I could see the faint smile on her face.

“I’m only telling the truth.”

“C’mon, now, Lord of the Flies, you sure know how to give a compliment... But to be honest, I think you should be taking the command. I think everyone agrees with me on that, right?”

“No. There are too many here for me to command. This battle is practically a war on the scale we’re fighting it. I don’t have experience with controlling this many troops at once.”

Back at the White Citadel of Protection, all I had to do was release that army of golems and let them do their work. It’s different this time.

“But... I don’t have a lot of experience in real combat either, you know? I’m not all that familiar with military strategy, so I can’t help but feel a bit nervous... Are you sure it’s going to be okay?”

“Don’t worry about that. Seras is going to be there to assist you.” I gestured to the former captain of the Holy Knights of Neah with my thumb. “She used to lead the knights of a whole nation. She’s studied troop movements and military strategy, meaning she’s much better suited to commanding large armies than I

am.”

I do need to get her to teach me about all that stuff someday...

“Eh? Then Seras should be the commander, right...? I don’t mind her taking over, you know?”

“Almost everyone here is from the Country at the End of the World. Right now it’s best if you’re the one giving the orders, not an outsider like Seras.”

“Ah...right.” Kil still seemed nervous, despite her assent. “But then, why not Geo?”

I suppose she’s just a bit panicked at the sudden promotion. I thought she was easygoing and unshakable, but I guess she’s got her limits.

“Geo will be out on the front lines—right there leading the charge.”

Geo rested the back of one of his blades on his shoulder. “Just where I like to be.”

“You’re not wrong, Kil. Geo’s a good leader in his own right. But with the incredible combat strength he has, he really should be on the front lines. Some of our troops aren’t used to real fighting, after all. He needs to be there to inspire them and spearhead the attack. I can’t be in command for that same reason. I need to be able to run around the field.”

Lise looked over at me.

“So... You intend on rushing about during the battle then?”

“Yeah. Think of the Lord of the Flies Brigade as a free squadron moving under its own command. I’ll be trying to support places where the situation looks most in need.”

“If I’m to be assisting Lady Kil, will we be acting separately during the fighting?” asked Seras.

“I’ll send a messenger or use a sound sphere if I need you. Unless that happens, I want you at Kil’s side doing everything you can to help her.”

“Understood.”

That’s another part of the reason I don’t want Seras commanding this whole

battle—I want her free to fight by my side if something happens.

“A-ahem, th-then what should I do?” asked Lise, taking the brief pause as her chance to speak.

“I want you to go back beyond the door with Amia for now and explain the situation to King Zect and Gratrah. They’ll know what to do once they understand what’s happening out here.”

“V-very well.”

“You’re good at hammering logic into an airtight argument and pushing it through, right? That’s all I’m asking you to do now,” I said, half joking.

“I-I know that much! I... Look I... I’m sorry about before, I already said that...!”

“I’m not just trying to be mean... The way you back up your arguments over and over, until other have no choice but to agree with you, is an incredible skill.”

“...You’re not *just* trying to be mean? So you were trying to be a *little* mean as well?”

“...Well, considering all the things you said to me earlier.”

“Perhaps it does make matters simpler when you speak frankly with me. I was so used to getting my way that I think I sabotaged myself.”

Lise looked to be falling into another bout of depression, so I placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Part of the reason I’m not excluding you from this battle is because I believe in your abilities. I’m counting on you. So don’t let me down.”

“O-of course!”

“Oh, and Lise?”

“Wh-what is it now?!”

“Once you’ve got yourself proper first aid, you should get some sleep.”

“Very well... I will do as you say.” Lise’s expression clouded over for a moment, and she bit her lower lip. It seemed there were emotions rising to the surface within her.

“What is it?”

“It’s all my fault! The harpy soldiers I sent out as messengers were all killed. I need to apologize to Gratrah, and to her family.”

“Still hard to think about, huh?” I said, watching her closely as I spoke. “If it’s too hard, you don’t have to take part in what’s to come...”

“No!” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. “I’ll do what I have to do—then repent and reflect on my foolish-ness once more. Now I...I have to protect those that still remain alive!”

Guilt, responsibility, pressure... There are times when all these things are needed in some measure. But they can be a terrible poison to the mind. Considering the way Lise must be thinking right about now, maybe I should say something to calm her down...

“Can’t say you should forget about it,” said Geo who was standing by Lise’s side. “But we’re about to go to war here. Humans and monsters will die... Some of us too.”

“...I know that,” Lise answered.

“But we hafta meet them in battle—we’ve gotta resist. Oppose this senseless violence. Stand up against them and fight for our lives, and for the lives to come.”

“...”

“If you feel like your mistake has caused some of our people to die, then save more lives than you’ve cost. That’s what it means to make amends, right?”

He said all “we” can do, instead of all “you” can do—I don’t know if that was on purpose or not... But Geo’s a heck of a leader either way.

“Yes...” She raised her head, still wiping away tears with her arm. “There’s no time for standing around now. I have to do what I can!”

Lise looked off to the side and put both hands behind her back.

“And, well...” She looked incredibly reluctant, and even a little embarrassed, to say those next few words. “...Thank you, Geo.”

“Huh?”

“N-nothing! I didn’t say anything... You dimwit!”

“...Hmph.”

With ears like his, there’s no way Geo didn’t hear what she just said. I can really feel the ice starting to thaw.

“Hmm... I think you might’ve changed Sir Geo, y’know? You had a change of heart or somethin’? Wait, don’t tell me—should I be congratulating you right now?” Amia looked at the two of them with narrowed eyes.

I handed her a piece of paper. “Here’s a list of things for you, Amia.”

“Hmh?”

There were written instructions on what the people in the Country at the End of the World should do, and I had added in a few extra notes while Geo and Lise were talking.

“Use these instructions as a guide and work together with Lise, will you?”

“I understand the order to form the monsters into an army of reinforcements. Fine. But do you really want me and Lady Gratrah to stay inside?”

“Yeah. I want you to send out several harpy messengers in our direction, but the Band of the Shining Snake and the king’s personal guard should stay in the city. The orcs, the kobolds, and the other monsters that can fight should remain there too.”

“Will we have enough forces out here to fight?”

“It’s likely the enemy has a divine beast on their side. Until we can capture them, there’s always the chance they could get past the door and invade us. I’m going to try and cut off as many invasion paths as possible, but they could always use ropes to scale the cliffs and find some new route to the door. Until we’ve found their *key*, I want to leave at least some of our forces behind in the city.”

Nyaki and Munin are still inside—I can’t let the Forbidden Words Clan die either.

“They can also be our reserves for the battle. If the worst happens, we can have them join us out here.”

“All right, yeah.”

Lise wanted to disband her country’s military, starting with their four main armies. But that also means she’s aware of what forces the Country at the End of the World has at its disposal. She’s ideally suited to pick the best soldiers that remain in the city, organize them, and send them out to fight. And she’ll have an experienced troop commander like Amia assisting her.

“...”

“What’s wrong, Belzegea-dono?”

“...Just one more thing, if you don’t mind,” I said to everyone, then turned my attention to Seras in particular. “Seras, could you quickly draw the crest of the Empire of Mira on this piece of paper for me?”

“I can do so, yes.”

“Thanks.”

Lise and the Four Shining Warriors all looked at each other in confusion, as Seras sketched out the crest.

“Here is the crest of the Empire of Mira,” she said.

A lion and a lily.

Geo looked at the crest, then up at me. “So, what is it about this symbol?”

“It was one of the things that Michaela told me, remember? The Empire of Mira has declared war on Alion.”

“Yeah... Come to think of it, he did say that, didn’t he?”

“What’s that have to do with this fight?” asked Amia.

“They’re fighting against each other.” Lise turned to me. “...You mean to say we have a mutual enemy?”

“The Empire of Mira might be the perfect candidate for the Country at the End of the World to form a diplomatic relationship with.”

Lise's expression became grave. "Just so..."

According to the Sword of Courage, they battled a bunch of Mira assassins before we came upon them. There might be other Mira forces close by.

"We should avoid killing their soldiers by mistake, lest we become allies in the future. If you happen to come across any troops bearing this mark, do not engage with them if possible," I said.

"If they really are set against Alion, I believe the Empire of Mira will welcome all the allies they can get," continued Seras. "If, for example... You added in that the Lord of the Flies Brigade might come along as an added bonus, that could get them on board for an alliance with your country."

"You think we should openly present ourselves as the Lord of the Flies Brigade?"

The Lord of the Flies Brigade is on the Country at the End of the World's side—should we let that information out to the Thirteen Orders of Alion or keep it hidden?

Behind Geo, I saw the Band of the Shining Dragon returning from the mouth of the valley path carrying shields and spears. They arrived with all of the anti-knight gear and began handing it out to the soldiers.

"Geo, do you have what I asked for?"

"Coming right up."

As the others armed themselves, Geo walked over to me and thrust a cloth bag into my hands. I took it and looked inside.

A black Leopard King mask and the garb of the Shadowblade Clan.

I took a second bag he held out to me and gave it to Seras.

"These are yours. It's the same size as your fly swordsman gear, so it should fit."

"U-understood." Seras took the bag curiously.

Geo folded his arms and snorted at her. "I had Yerma make a few changes to the traditional Leopard King and Leopard Princess gear we use for ceremonies."

“Actually I’d already decided we aren’t going to participate in this battle as the Lord of the Flies Brigade.” I said to Seras. “I asked Geo to prepare us these masks and clothes—they’ll make us look like leopardmen at a glance.”

Seras inspected the Leopard Princess clothes she’d been given. “I see...”

“When we’re wearing these masks, my pseudonym is going to be *Dolis*, and yours *Koudelka*. Geo—make sure everyone gets the message.”

“Right.”

I took another careful look at the Leopard King mask in my hands. It was finely detailed, handmade by a skilled dragonkin craftsman. The eyes of the panther seemed to burn in contrast to the deep black of the rest—strangely similar to my own Lord of the Flies mask. I checked inside to see holes cut out for fitting the voice-change and voice-amplifying crystals that I’d asked for.

Fine work... I have Yerma to thank for this.

“I’ll have to use three different outfits for this battle, depending on the situation I’m in.”

The Lord of the Flies, the Leopard King, and the messenger.

I decided to leave Sleii with Seras and took a different mount for myself. Soon, I had stuffed the Lord of the Flies and messenger clothes into a bag and fitted it to the saddle of my new horse.

If I’m going to be disguised as a messenger, I should also really be using one of the enemy’s horses. Better to have Sleii stay with her, in case I need Seras to come speeding across the battlefield to help, too.

“Right then—let’s go over this again.”

Lise and Amia had already left to make their way back to the door, but I gathered Seras, Geo, Kil, and Niko around me. Loa was there too—the hound of hell and leader of the monsters who was capable of speaking the human tongue.

“First priority is the Divine Beast that the enemy has on their side. If possible I want to capture them...but if we can’t, then neutralize them by any means necessary. Also, I’d like you to avoid doing battle with the Sixth Order if

possible, they're the most dangerous enemy we're facing here. If we encounter them, report back to me or Seras."

I went on to describe the members of the Sixth Order I'd been told about.

All I know is what Michaela told me... It might not be accurate. Especially about their captain—Johndoe. "His lack of distinguishing features is what makes him distinctive." How does anyone even look for someone like that? But it doesn't sound like their vice-captain is going to be any easier to identify either. In that case...

"The easiest way to spot them will be the numbers carved into their armor and flown on their banners. Michaela said the knights are made up of thirteen orders, so they use numbers to identify each other from far away. If you see the number 6 on any group's banners—retreat. There's a good chance that the Sixth Order is the one that has the divine beast with them. They should be the same color as Nyaki, so you might be able to tell them apart from far away."

I continued, "If you see anyone that looks like a Mira soldier, don't fight them if you can avoid it. Try to express that you intend to negotiate instead of fighting. But there's no need to actually negotiate with them right there on the spot, we can send someone to talk later."

Everyone was listening carefully.

"But if it looks like they're preparing to attack, then defend yourself. If you feel you're in danger, you can either run or fight back. In any case, if you come across anyone from Mira, give a report of the time and the details of the situation to me or Seras. Is that understood?"

After that, I gave a rough outline of my own movements to the group, and everyone started to prepare for battle in earnest. Seras and I moved a little way from the rest of the soldiers to change clothes in a screened area Geo had set up for us.

"Ahem... Since there is so little time, shall we go ahead and get changed in there together?"

I agreed to Seras's proposal, and we changed into our respective outfits together in the cramped space.

Seras finished putting on her Leopard Princess clothes, and I donned the mask of the Leopard King. Kil rushed over to us as we emerged from behind the screen.

“Got centaur scouts reportin’ enemies on the move,” she said.

“They’re here, then.”

Finally... They’ve made their move.

I rode out from the valley on my horse, towards the rocky area beyond.

I’m pretty used to riding horses other than Sleis now—all thanks to Seras’s training, I guess.

The area I found myself in was directly north of our main camp—it would be easy to escape to the east or west if something happened. Geo’s Band of the Shining Leopard had gone north as well but was far ahead of my position.

Our forces were on “standby” in all directions. Geo’s army was still mostly in reconnaissance mode. The enemy was advancing on us from three directions: the east, north, and west.

“Each order tends to avoid infringing on areas the others are in. Even if they attack, they’ll be spread out and all take different routes through the area.”

Michaela’s intel seems to be accurate. As he said, they’re not grouping up. Convenient for us that they aren’t unified into a single army—especially considering the target count limits on my status effect skills.

It’d be harder for us to deal with them if they all just came rushing through the valley in force. Now we can isolate and crush them individually.

Suddenly a female centaur appeared in the distance, galloping towards us at speed.

“Report!” she shouted.

Cocoroniko Doran’s Band of the Shining Dragon were the first to launch themselves into battle on the western flank. Their enemy—the Fourth Order.

Then came another shout: “Report!”

News of the battle began flying in.

“Enemies approaching on the eastern flank! Roughly 100 to 150 in number! Sera—K-Koudelka has already given her orders in response!”

The leopardman messenger retreated after giving me his message.

So I'm already on the front lines...

There was a sparse forest stretching out before me, but otherwise the area was rocky all around—except for a small oasis of green in the center where Geo and the others waited in hiding.

Another messenger came.

“R-report from the Band of the Shining Dragon! They have already engaged the enemy in battle!” The messenger’s voice was filled with urgency.

“They have won! The Fourth Order appear to be in a temporary retreat! Our forces sustained only light casualties...!”

I quickly took out my map and spread it out to confirm the areas where fighting was taking place.

“Here?”

“Y-yes!” said the messenger nodding, still buzzing with excitement.

He must be feeling it in his skin... The battle happening all around him.

According to the messenger’s explanation, our forces had used the shortcut I found in my survey of the area.

Bring the enemy in close enough, then send a different unit through the shortcut to catch them in a pincer movement. They didn’t get impatient and charge in. And from the sounds of it...

“They did well—just as ordered. Niko’s the one who really carried the battle, eh? The Band of the Shining Dragon might be stronger than I thought.” I turned my eyes from the messenger to look straight ahead.

Sounds like she cut down quite a few enemies, swinging around that oversized sword of hers.

Our main force on the west flank is Niko’s Band of the Shining Dragon. In the

center we've got Geo's Band of the Shining Leopard. Finally in the east, the Band of the Shining Horse, with the combined monster army to support them. The hound of hell Loa is leading the armies there, while Kil Mail commands from our main base of operations.

The east flank is the only place we don't have one of the Four Shining Warriors in place. I've heard Loa is pretty strong in a fight though...

THE TENTH ORDER OF KNIGHTS

THE TENTH ORDER was led by Aigis Wine.

"Right then..." Her long black hair hung in three bunches behind her head. She adjusted the position of her monocle and tightened the grip she had on her halberd from atop her horse. "Perhaps it's about time we made our move as well?"

The blade of her halberd was shaped like a butcher's knife. The Tenth Order were sometimes known as the *Gourmet Knights*.

"Hope there's some new demi-humans and monsters we've never seen before, eh, Torres?"

"Quite so, yes."

Aigis's vice-captain Torres sat mounted by her side, his horse level with hers. He was a mustached man in the prime of his life, with narrow eyes. His thick arms were covered in the light burn scars—marks of valor from years spent in the kitchen. Behind their two mounted leaders, over 100 cavalry troopers waited.

"So glad we can get locally-sourced ingredients out here!"

"Quite so, yes."

"The spices and all the rest, of course."

"Yes. All in order."

"And the pots and pans—?"

“Washed and ready to go.” Torres took a furious bite out of the dried meat in his hand. “I’ve even brought along that big pot we had newly made.”

“Very good,” said Aigis, setting a hand to her jaw and giggling a little. “These monsters can be quite tasty when you cook them up just right. The demi-humans aren’t all that bad either, depending on which ones you get and which parts of them you go for. But it all depends on the chef...”

“I think when it comes to cooking demi-humans, it’s really worth the effort.”

Animals are kept for livestock, and monsters...aren’t. How do we divide creatures into these two groups? By what standards? First, whether they’re suitable for eating or not.

“Monsters shouldn’t be eaten,” it’s said... And so nobody ventures into the underground ruins in search of food. Monsters are only ever eaten in emergencies, when there are no other options—and demi-humans are considered less edible still.

“Oh my, I wonder if there are centaurs here too?! Horse meat!”

“Humans don’t tend to think of monsters or demi--humans as food, do they... They’re such terribly difficult ingredients to prepare well. The extra time and care to do it right makes all the difference though—don’t you think?”

“I hate fighting humans! They taste awful, y’know! I don’t wanna fight them anymore! I just ha~te them!”

“What luck that we are only here to fight demi--humans and monsters, then!”

“Wonderful! How marvelous that the Goddess would give us this opportunity! Hey, you!” Aigis called a few of her subordinates over. “You did bring enough casting nets to capture these beasts, didn’t you?!”

“Y-yes, ma’am! All we could carry!”

“Fine work! But don’t kill the enemies if you don’t have to!”

Kill a thing, and it starts to turn immediately... Rigor mortis can be such a bother to deal with. Butchering is best done fresh.

“Oh, but butchering is ever so much fun! Doing it while they’re still alive though... It’s such a noisy affair, isn’t it? That’s the only downside. The

screeching is just so irritating.”

“*Munch...* Such is the life of the chef. You’re already champing at the bit, Lady Aigis.”

“Quite right! The very essence of what it means to be a chef! Oh, I know... Let’s sell all the skin and horns to the Eighth Order! They do love their arts and crafts!”

“Now then, Lady Aigis,” said Torres, tightening the grip on the bone saw in his hands. “What percent of the enemy should we leave alive in this battle?”

“Hmm... I’d like at least thirty percent left over for fresh ingredients. If there are any families we do want to get them all on the same plate, don’t we? ♪ Oh, and leave at least one of each race alive, mind you! Is that understood?”

“Very well, ma’am.”

Aigis gave a grand, exaggerated wave to the troops behind her. “That understood, you lot?!”

The mounted knights behind her responded loudly—their morale seemed to be high.

While Alion’s sixth and twelfth orders would be high on the list of knights not to be captured by, the Tenth Order wouldn’t be far behind. They were strong too—there was no doubt about that. They marched on their stomachs. They couldn’t possibly be weak.

“It seems the Fourth Order is engaging with the enemy on our western flank!” shouted an approaching messenger.

“Wh-what... What kind are they?!”

“Most appear to be dragonkin!”

“Ah! Dragon meat! That sounds delicious. They should come over this way!”

Another messenger came. “Report! A herd of centaur have been seen, still some distance to the south of us! It seems they’re heading this way!”

“Ahh... I suppose we should attack them first then?”

“Yes. Centaurs are fine meat, you know.”

“Haah! I-I have a report...!” Another messenger suddenly burst out from the forest and came shambling towards them, gasping for breath.

“Eh? You there... From one of the other groups, aren’t you? Well, well, they got you good now, didn’t they? You look terrible! Filthy! Shamefully disgusting!”

The messenger’s clothes were dirty, and he was covered in blood. There were two arrows sticking out of the man, and his breathing was shallow and incredibly weak.

He struggled forward—his legs trembling with every step.

Doesn’t look long for this world. What happened to him?

“We were attacked, my group was on the verge of complete destruction, and... W-we scattered...”

“Seems our enemy is quite capable,” said Aigis.

“Th-there was an ambush... Leopardmen in the south, near the forest... They were waiting for us.”

“They’re really that strong?”

“Yes... B-but one in particular was a monster... Seemed to be leading the rest of them. Red eyes, black fur...larger than the rest... G-Geo, I think that is what they called him... He wielded two black blades... Ghh... Th-that...thing! H-how can we hope to defeat them...?!”

For a moment, the man seemed to be remembering the assault, then he let out a pitiful scream and crumpled at Aigis’s feet.

But this is a messenger of the Thirteen Orders of Alion—the soldier before me is no weakling.

“Well then, *heh heh*... A big black leopardman, you say...” Aigis gripped her halberd and looked off towards the north. “Leopardman doesn’t sound at all bad now, does it? Should we head to the center of the battlefield, then? Sounds like they’d be worth eating! I want to butcher them! No need to hold back when you’re dealing with demi-humans and monsters, is there? Wonderful!”

“Paralyze.”

“Wuh?” Aigis froze, still facing toward the center of the battlefield.

I... I can't move?

She struggled to keep the messenger in her vision. He was no longer shaking.

Then he let out a shrill whistle.

Is that some kind of signal? Wait...that blood on his clothes. That isn't his. And he was so filthy I couldn't see the number on his uniform...

Was that just a coincidence?

What was happening to Aigis at the front began to spread commotion down the lines. The bloody messenger ran straight for them, heading to the back.

“Berserk.”

“Wh-what...? Lady Aigis? You there! Which order are you from anyw—”

“Grhaaah—!”

“Hey?! What are you doing?! Ow?! You idiot, you bit me...!”

“You little...! There's somethin' suspicious 'bout that one! Butcher 'im!”

“Dark.”

“Where'd he go?! N-no, wait...! M-my eyes?!”

Panic began to spread among the knights that could still move in the rear guard.

What's happening...? This is the enemy, there's no mistaking that. If only our remaining men can take out that man disguised as a messenger, then...

“Gawrrr...”

Aigis shifted her eyes back to the south. Across the rocky expanse—a horde of monsters appeared from behind the patch of boulders before her. Her heart leaped when she saw the beast that led them.

A three-headed dog monster... I-is that—a-a hound of hell?! The real deal?!

The horde advanced on them, low guttural cries rising from the backs of their throats. Some of the monsters Aigis had never even seen in her books before—they were not golden-eyed, but looked just as fearsome and angry.

These beasts are...organized!

Suddenly the “messenger” returned to the front lines. The rear guard was still restless, clamoring about something Aigis could not see.

“My Lady! What is the matter?! What are our orders?!”

They crowded towards the front to reach her—but Aigis had no voice to instruct them with. The false messenger swiped Aigis’s halberd from her hands.

Then he swung—slicing open Aigis’s throat as she sat astride her horse.

“Ah, gh...!”

The false messenger then plucked the arrows from his shoulder. They had been stuck there superficially, not driven into his arm. The scared way he had presented himself earlier—the grave injuries, the blood—it had all been an act.

He snorted at them derisively, looking almost bored. The terror was completely gone from his face. He even seemed relaxed now—a calm that was unnatural on the battlefield. On the verge of death, Aigis felt extraordinarily afraid of this man. He looked up at her with cruel, emotionless eyes. No compassion. No mercy.

“Pretty brutal, this weapon... What were you going to *butcher* with this? What’s that big cooking pot over there for again? Butchering demi-humans and monsters, was it?”

...Well, I can imagine what you had planned. I just don’t care anymore.”

It was then that the hound of hell suddenly spoke words in the human tongue—a question.

“Should we bind them?”

“No need. The ones in the rear guard don’t seem to be running—they’re even coming this way... Don’t let anyone get away, if you can help it.”

“In this terrain, with my speed, we should have no problem chasing down stragglers.”

“Good.”

The hound of hell howled, and the other monsters joined in, making the

sound all that much more terrifying. They were going on the attack. A ferocity appeared in the beast's devilish eyes.

That human... He's controlling the monsters...?

He raised his head a little and glared at her with contempt. It looked for a moment as if he detested her.

"Kill them," the messenger said, pointing his halberd at the rest of the Tenth Order.

"Charge."

13:45—the Tenth Order of Knights were annihilated.

MIMORI TOUKA

"THEY TRULY FELL for your plan," said Loa as he sat by my side. All of the great beast's heads were focused on me.

"Squee—!"

Piggymaru was on Loa's back.

I wouldn't have been able to hide the little guy so well in the messenger's clothes. Piggymaru was so useful in the battle against the Tenth Order earlier.

"According to Michaela, the Thirteen Orders of Alion aren't friendly with each other. Not many of them are going to know each and every soldier in the other orders... That's what I figured, at least."

Wouldn't have worked against a commander like Seras, who knows her subordinates' names.

"Ah-ahem... Do you mind staying still?"

"Ah? Yeah, sorry."

Loa was wiping the blood and dirt from my clothes.

Any dried blood or faint stains will look suspicious—if my clothes are going to be dirty, it should be fresh dirt.

I looked over the armor of the Tenth Order that lay nearby.

“Now we’ve got some of their gear too.”

“Will we defeat them all with this strategy?”

“I can only hope it’ll be that easy...but I don’t think so.

If all the enemies we face are of this level, the same strategy would probably be effective again. If it keeps working, no point in changing up tactics. But I’m not naive enough to think all of them are going to fall for this. That goes especially for the larger groups of knights we’ll have to battle. In larger scale battles there’s a limit to what a single person like me can do. What matters when making decisions here is going to be how many men the enemy has.

“Your fighting style is cruder than I imagined it would be, Sir Dolis ...”

“Beautiful kills, eh...? I don’t think I’m going to manage any of those. That’s not the way I fight, anyway. I just do what works.”

“Hmm, I am not sure we could face you in battle.”

“From where I’m sitting, sure seems like you’ve got the upper hand in terms of pure combat ability.”

When the last of the Tenth Order ran—it was Loa who pursued them. A hound from hell—sharp claws, a body slam like a sledgehammer, and thick fangs for biting. Not to mention Loa can breathe fire. The way he managed to stop them in their tracks was incredible.

“You’re mobile and quick... I can see why you were chosen to be leader of the monsters.”

“You’re good at giving compliments,” said Loa, wagging his tail back and forth.

Is he embarrassed? It almost feels like he’s not used to getting praise. Even his other two heads are looking a little sheepish.

“...The monsters here can fight much better than I expected—same goes for the Band of the Shining Dragon,” I said.

“The ones here on the battlefield are trained elites, you see. They’re more suited for combat than the monsters that are left in the city.”

These are the kinds of monsters you’d see as enemies in the games I used to play. All the golden-eyed monsters I’ve met here have been hostile—it’s only really Piggymaru and Slei I’ve been able to count as companions. But now there’s a whole group of monsters on my side, fighting to defend their Country at the End of the World.

“But the movements we’re currently engaged in are all thanks to Se—Koudelka’s abilities as a commander,” said Loa.

“Well, yeah.” *He almost said “Seras.” Must be hard to get used to the different name.*

Our overall positioning right now isn’t bad. Seras has put us all in the right places—she’s really good at shifting our forces, too. Should’ve expected nothing less of the Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah, I guess. I wouldn’t have been able to pull this off. Everything goes so smoothly with her in charge.

“Report!” A messenger approached, a demi-human—*no way for the enemy to disguise themselves as our messengers.*

“The western flank... They’re still somewhat far from our forces, but we see signs of enemy movement!”

“They’re not letting up, are they...”

Enemy forces gathering in the west? Or is this just a feint to make us think so?

“What word from Geo in the center?”

“They’ve yet to see any of the enemies’ forces. They remain on standby at the designated location...”

I looked at Loa, who shook his heads.

“We’ve seen no sign of their forces since our defeat of the Tenth Order either.”

We had a single captive from the order until a few minutes ago. He was on the verge of death, I promised to ease his passing if he gave me the information I asked for.

Not that what he gave me was worth much... But from what I can see of the situation about us...

“The Thirteen Orders of Alion aren’t all that aware of the movements or locations of their respective orders. They’re moving under their own volition, each with their own plans. That’s the impression I have, at least.”

Meaning they’ve got no central commander organizing them. It means that they can’t combine their strength, but it’s hard to predict what they’ll do next.

I stood up and spoke to the messenger. “Prepare me a mount. I’m going to go to the western flank to meet up with Niko. Come on, Piggymaru.”

“Squee! *Boi~ng!*” The little slime bounced from Loa’s back and onto my shoulder, happy to be back.

“Squeeee~♪!”

“What should we do next?”

“Pull back a little and wait on standby at the designated location... If the enemies come watch them closely, and engage if attacked—that’s about it for now.” Then I looked at the messenger. “Tell headquarters where I’m going. But if Koudelka has any other ideas, you should do what she says instead.”

“Yes!” The messenger disappeared into the brush.

“...Be easier if I had a smartphone, huh?”

“Smartphone? What is that?” asked Loa.

“A device for talking to someone when they’re far away. Can’t use it here, though.”

Can’t even charge the thing up.

“It sounds more convenient than a sound sphere. I too would be relieved if we had a...smart phone thing...”

“Well, at least the enemy has no good way of getting real time information about what’s happening across the whole battlefield either... Can’t exactly take pictures or videos of anything.”

And that also makes this battlefield perfect for me to make my moves.

THE TWELFTH ORDER OF KNIGHTS

“...**A**H.” The dragonkin looked down nervously at the cliff to his back and swallowed hard.

“So this is it.”

“Finally got you cornered, eh, demi-humans!”

The Twelfth Order had driven them to the edge of the cliff—the dragonkin all now faced the knights, a sheer drop behind them if any happened to lose their footing. The knights formed up before them, pinning them in place—there was nowhere to run.

“*Muah ha ha...* Not bad, considering you’re up against *Twelfth Order*! Get a little full of yourselves after defeating the fourth, eh? Don’t lump us in with those fools!”

“Got that right, old boy.”

“You there, at the front—the one shielding the others. That arrogant fool looks to be their leader. The others called her... Niko, no?” Captain Ars Dormitory, a white-haired man of advanced age, narrowed his eyes at the dragonkin.

Beside him on horseback sat his vice-captain, Gretchen Dormitory. She was a well-built old woman—only her face showed the marks of her age, which constantly wore a wide smile.

Both were already seventy-four years of age, but their bodies were tough and their backs unbent—they looked young for how old they were. The soldiers under their command were all fairly old as well. The Twelfth Order of Knights were also known as the *Vampire Knights*.

“These dragonkin sure look young, eh? I do love killing the young, even if they do happen to be demi-humans!”

“Got that right, old boy.”

“Watching the youth suffer and squirm... Nothing like it in the world!”

“But the kids today have no stamina, do they? Tease ‘em a bit, and they’re always tellin’ you to stop... They must’a been spoiled as kids! Underestimating this harsh world of ours, I tell ya.”

“Not enough respect for the elders, I say. The Goddess has been alive longer than anybody in this world, she’s the one we should listen to! Respect your elders!”

“Yes. Yes. But killing these young’uns...oh, oh it truly...” Gretchen looked down at her hands, bringing them together as if in prayer. “...makes me feel young again! I love these battlefields, places nobody’s goin’ to complain no matter how many we kill. What a blessing!”

“Heh, feels like every time we kill one their life just pours into us. The younger they are, the more we get back.”

“It’s like you get three whole years back from killing a baby, ain’t it... I wonder if they’ve got lots of those in this country o’ theirs?”

“Gotta have them tell us all about it! Eh?!” Ars shouted, dismounting from his horse and drawing his blade.

The other knights did the same. They clearly had the dragonkin outnumbered.

“Can’t charge straight at them with that cliff at their backs after all... Fallen for this strategy of theirs, haven’t we... But did *you* misjudge *us*, eh? This old body of mine is more than strong enough on horseback *and* on foot.”

“S’pose it’d be easier to just shoot them all to death with arrows, but...”

“Doesn’t feel like you’re really *absorbing* their life that way, does it? Closer you get before you kill ‘em, the better it feels!”

“But we’re on a bit of a slope, old boy.”

“Might be hard on some of our soldiers’ knees. But I’m fine!”

The dragonkin they called Niko lowered her body to the ground and tightened the grip she had on her sword. The greatsword was far too long for her, but she held it up as if it was light as air.

“*Ho Ho!* Quite the expert, I see.”

“That dragon girl, she’s tough, old boy... Let’s kill her together.”

“Yes, yes... It might be too dangerous for me on my own. Shouldn’t get complacent, old girl.”

“The others... We can overwhelm them and cut them down. They look green, not used to a real fight.”

“Pity for them, then.” Ars chuckled, his face warping into a sinister grin as his eyes found their target. “No mercy. Kill them all.”

He charged—the others went with him, veteran elites all rushing towards Niko and the other dragonkin.

Then Ars stopped.

“...?!”

The others froze as well.

“Wh-what...?”

The dragonkin they had cornered—pinned against the cliff... Suddenly new dragonkin soldiers began to appear from their rear guard. More monsters began to show up as well, swelling their numbers to three times what they had been before.

“They...scaled the cliffs? But so many of them...!”

It was impossible to think that they could have climbed so fast and all appeared at once.

“No! Wait!”

There were even more now—the dragonkin soldiers were multiplying.

“What’s happening?!”

“O-old boy...!”

COCORONIKO DORAN

WHAT LAY TO NIKO'S REAR was not technically a *cliff*, per se—what her forces really had at their backs was a light slope downwards.

Though from the enemy's perspective, I imagine it appears to be a cliff.

Niko's acting certainly helped sell that. She had walked up to the edge of the slope and looked down warily as if scared she might fall.

Her forces could crawl on their bellies, or crouch as they moved to hide themselves from the enemy's vision as they advanced. There was nowhere else in the rocky ground of the surrounding area that could have held an ambush, so the enemy didn't anticipate one. Said enemy had been convinced they had a cliff to their backs, when in reality, it was only a light slope. Given the topography around them, they had no idea an ambush was even possible. It was easy for Niko's army to draw them in.

This place the Lord of the Flies chose... Using the terrain to its fullest potential in battle, coupled with a believable routine to convince the enemy. To think they would fall for it so completely.

The knights had one main strength—their charge, especially effective against foot soldiers.

The knights were too wary of falling off the "cliff" while on horseback. This terrain also gives them less space to work with during the battle—less room to maneuver. That leaves them the option of dismounting to fight, using arrows, or some kind of offensive magical attacks.

Niko had already confirmed in advance that the enemy had no archer knights among their ranks and saw no signs of magic when they clashed for the first time. But even without any ranged attacks in their arsenal, the knights themselves were more than strong enough to compensate.

They're a good deal stronger than that mess of a Fourth Order from earlier.

Considering the enemy's strength, Niko knew from the outset that her infantry could never match their knights. That was why she made the decision to use the terrain to her advantage.

Add to that the strategy the Lord of the Flies proposed—a feigned retreat to

draw them towards our ranks. We led them to the place our reinforcements lay in ambush.

Niko raised her banners, and her archers released a flurry of arrows from the bottom of the slope. They arched over the dragonkin soldiers, falling like rain.

“You lot, shields up!” The old captain barked orders to his men.

But it was too late—several knights fell to the arrows from above.

“Gyhhh!”

Niko ground her foot against the rock below. “Come now. With me!”

She charged, and her dragonkin soldiers flooded in behind her.

“Tch! Horses are getting scared and starting to scatter! My mount as well! That’s the darn problem with young horses these days! No discipline!”

“Old boy, there are more enemies here than we bargained for! Let’s call for the kids in the Fourth Order we left behind!”

“More of them young ’uns than us old fighters, eh?! Nothing for it but to call them up to bolster our numbers! Go, send for them!” the old captain called out behind him for a messenger.

The two armies were almost equal in number now. Taking advantage of his knights’ charge, and the sudden increase in the dragonkin numbers, he now had the enemy’s guard down.

“Press them before they have time to reinforce! Go! Proud dragon soldiers, advance!” Niko shouted, slicing at the old captain.

He parried, meeting her blade with his own. *Clang!*

“Heavy, I grant you that—but no technique! Such youth!”

“Gh-nh... Such strength for your age...!”

“My, my...”

Whoosh!

The old woman sliced at her, and Niko had to twist backwards to just barely dodge the attack. When she looked down, Niko saw the curved blade had

drawn a faint line of blood across the side of her hip. The dragonkin soldiers rushed to her side.

“Lady Niko! Allow us to assist you!”

“Careful! These two are strong! Don’t be fooled by their age!”

Niko swung hard at the couple with full force, forcing them back. Then immediately she lunged forward to stab at the old woman.

“You brat! Really swinging around that blasted greatsword aren’t you! Bragging about your youth without even thinking about it! That’s why I hate kids!”

“My, my! Attacking the elderly, what a terrible child you are! We experienced seniors are just going to have to *take care of you!*”

“I’ve heard enough of your selfish rantings—among those of any age, of any gender, there are good people and there are bad. Some grow experienced, while others remain foolish... And you two are evil fools. I will cut you down, here and now!”

“Shut up, you meddlesome brat!”

“You’re so annoying, you! Where is your respect for the elderly?! I’m going to torture that demi-human and set her head on a spike, old boy!”

“Shining Dragons, this is a fight against time! We must put the enemy down before their reinforcements arrive, no matter what it takes!”

The fighting was roughly even—neither side had the advantage. But one small change could turn the tide of the entire battle at any moment. Niko heard footsteps drawing closer. She couldn’t see who it was, but she could sense that they were approaching, just over the ridge from where they were fighting...

“That Fourth Order lot are finally here!” shouted the old captain triumphantly, lunging to slice at her once more. The old woman jumped in to support him, leaping at Niko from the perfect blind spot—she could barely stave off their attacks.

If the enemy is reinforced—we’ll be at a disadvantage.

Niko stood right at the front of her lines, filling in the gap that their numbers

left with her own presence.

“Gah!”

I need to hurry up and defeat these two, so I can switch to fighting their reinforcements!

The old couple started to speed up their attacks, as if sensing that she was losing patience.

“Two on one! Everybody knows numbers win battles!”

For a brief moment—Niko doubted her own eyes.

“Old boy!”

“What is it, old girl?!”

“Th-that’s not the Fourth Order!”

“...I beg your pardon?”

A horde of monsters leaped into the corner of Niko’s vision. There weren’t many of them there—but they were *allies*.

“My goodness?! What are the Fourth Order playing at? Youngsters these days are useless, I tell you!”

“Enemies to the rear! Don’t let them catch us in a pincer attack! Colom, take your squad and defeat their reinforcements!”

The enemy didn’t seem all that flustered by the monsters’ appearance. Their rear guard quickly formed ranks and waited in battle-ready positions to meet them in combat. Niko wore a sour look on her face.

They aren’t even flinching at this small shift in the tide of battle. These men are combat veterans and...skilled soldiers, above all else!

“We’ve got them in our sights! Colom’s squad will show these monsters what knights are made of! We’ll grind them into dust! They aren’t even a challenge compared to the ones in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters!”

“*Ho ho ho ho!* They’ve truly underestimated the Thirteen Orders of Alion! Let’s boil their corpses and feed them to the dogs!”

“Eh?” Behind the old captain and the old woman—Niko saw something.

A black leopardman...? No.

“Paralyze.” It was Belzegea, clad in the black garb of the Leopard King.

They’ve stopped...?!

The old soldiers had frozen. Sensing the perfect opportunity to strike, Niko didn’t hesitate for a moment, bringing her greatsword down to slash down at them from above.

“H-hyy?! Wh... Wait!”

The old man was split in two, from shoulder to hip. He was dead—beyond question. Niko then turned, -focusing strength into her thighs and twisting her body.

“No, hnn!”

She swung down on the old woman’s head like she was chopping firewood.
Whhph!

“Ghhgh?! ”

It split like an old melon, and she perished on the spot.

“I have killed the enemy’s generals!” Niko called across the battlefield at once. Her words shook the remaining knights, and their morale shattered. Niko immediately charged towards them to help her allies in their fight. As she ran, she glanced at the enemy soldiers who were engaging the horde of monsters who had come to reinforce them, and noticed something strange.

They’re practically being annihilated... The battle appears so one-sided. Those enemy soldiers... Are they standing perfectly still?

“My cursed-magic holds them in place.”

“Belz—Dolis!”

That’s right. When he’s wearing the Leopard King clothes, his name is not Belzegea but Dolis.

The Lord of the Flies snorted at her in response. “Killed them before we could get any intel, eh?”

“I’m sorry... I acted rashly.”

“Don’t worry about it. Come on—let’s clean this up.”

“Thank you for your leniency.”

The tide had turned.

14:36—the Twelfth Order of Knights were annihilated.

Once she finally had time to take a break and rest, Niko went to speak to the Lord of the Flies.

“Thank you for your help. Were the monsters you brought to reinforce us not meant for the central area?”

“Geo told me to bring them with me when I told him I was coming west.”

“Geo said that?”

“Lise works fast. We’ve already gotten some fresh troops from the Country at the End of the World. They’re on their way to join up with Geo now.”

“I see.” The Lord of the Flies looked to the east. “Since he’s about to receive more soldiers, he allowed you to take the monsters under his command to the flank.”

“We found a bunch of Fourth Order soldiers while I was heading this way. Seemed like they were headed in the same direction, so we crushed them just in case, then all came straight here.”

“You spoke of cursed-magic... Is the strange power you used to prevent those two from moving some kind of magic, or something else entirely?”

“Hmm...something else, I think. Think of it as like a unique power that only I’ve got.”

“Understood. I will not press you further.” Niko looked down at the enemy corpses strewn about the battlefield. “Your strategy worked perfectly. I must confess... It makes me terrified that someday you may switch sides and do battle against us.”

“All I can do is just armchair strategize without someone who’s capable of actually pulling off the plans. You and your allies made my plans a reality—I’m not the only one that’s terrifying.”

“...*Heh*, and so diplomatic, I might add.”

“I suppose my mouth has gotten me this far. Anyway...” The Lord of the Flies took a knee to inspect the enemies’ armor. “Now we’ve defeated the Twelfth Order as well.”

He looked up.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, after seeing the look on her face.

“It’s nothing... I was just worrying about Geo. All the monsters that were stationed in the center of the battlefield were sent here. If the new reinforcements he’s to receive are intercepted by the enemy, then his Band of the Shining Leopard will be forced to fight alone.”

It was then that a messenger came from Geo’s camp. He steadied his ragged breathing before saying, “Report! Geo’s forces, the Band of the Shining Leopard, have engaged the enemy—!”

“The Thirteenth Order have attacked but are almost completely routed! Geo has personally defeated the enemy leader.”

THE SIXTH ORDER

THE VICE-CAPTAIN FERENOCH surveyed the scene from atop the hill. Thick clouds were gathering in the sky above, and rain looked to be on the way.

“If what the messengers say is true, these Country at the End of the World folk are really puttin’ up a fight. Michaela’s prob’ly dead already, huh?”

The rest of the Sixth Order were drawn up behind him—their captain Johndoe standing at the rear.

“For an army that has been locked behind their door for so long, they seem to move like experienced soldiers. Have they grown accustomed to battle through

frequent civil wars? Or do they have an incredibly capable commander at the helm?" mused Johndoe, walking out in front of his vice-captain.

"Maybe they've already joined up with Mira."

"It's possible, yes. I see harpy-like shadows darting about in the distance, but they aren't being used on the front lines. Likely they are keeping them away at the back where they cannot be shot down. They are no doubt using their other races as messengers at the front. Based on what I can see from up here... I believe the enemy's defense down there is quite solid. It should be much easier to simply storm down and break them, but with the current situation, this may prove somewhat more bothersome."

"Cap', you really got an eye for this stuff."

"I didn't expect the enemy to go so far, you see. With things as they stand, it makes me quite sad we aren't able to deploy the Sword of Courage here after all."

"What's wrong, cap'?"

Johndoe flicked a coin in his hand up into the air and caught it again.

"Send out messengers to the other orders, tell them the following..." Johndoe gave Ferenoch a number of messages to convey, among which were instructions regarding the messengers.

"You want us to double check the order numbers 'n' identity of our messengers, huh? How come?"

"If our only enemies here are monsters and demi--humans, then it matters not. But that Wildly Beautiful Emperor disguised his assassins as members of the Monster Slayer Knights to ambush the Sword of Courage. If they have him on their side, there's a danger they could use his pawns to falsify reports. I would not put it past the man to use such tactics."

"Don't really care about the other orders, or hang out with them much either, do we? I don't remember what all those guys look like..."

"The enemy may use that against us. Since some of the orders have already fallen, there's a distinct chance the enemy may use their armor to disguise

themselves. If I were in their position, and had humans under my control, I would do the same.”

“I see... We can’t turn into monsters or demi-humans, but if that Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s on their side, they can use those kinda tactics, eh? Man, the enemy gets all the good stuff.”

The coin he flipped landed back in the palm of Johndoe’s hand. “The second and ninth orders...they should survive. If we in the Sixth Order are going to be here in the shadows, we should keep those two out in front.”

He looked down at the coin in his hand.

“Without a proper front, of course... There will be nothing to hide behind.”

“So the reason we’re kindly warning the others is just cause we’d be outta luck if the second and ninth went down, eh?” asked Ferenoch.

“Should that happen, the enemy is sure to come for the divine beast—for Radice.”

The divine beast was currently back near the rear guard, whistling as he urinated into a sack—the contents of the sack still stubbornly clinging to life.

“If we lose Radice, we’ve basically lost the battle, huh? We coulda never given Radice over to Michaela’s guys.”

“But... We might consider using our divine beast as bait.”

“Whatcha thinkin’, cap’?”

“The enemy is quite carefully moving their troops about the field. If the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is behind it, we cannot afford to be complacent.”

“Whoa...”

“What is the matter?”

“J-just for a second, cap’... Did you just smile?! You’re always so emotionless!”

“Unthinkable, I... I just...” Johndoe flicked his coin back up into the air, and Ferenoch swiped in to catch it. “The way the enemy is strategizing, I feel a certain closeness to their movements. It’s a strange way of putting it, I know—but it’s as if they’re holding a mirror up to me. I have never felt this way

before.”

It was closer even than he felt to the Strongest Man in the World, with whom he shared blood.

“So, like, you feel close to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, huh?”

“No doubt he is behind it all, yes.”

“Can’t underestimate him then.”

“Well now. We should also make our own move soon. Ferenoch...”

“Gotcha!” Ferenoch stood by his captain’s side, closed his eyes, and placed both hands to his ears as if listening for something.

“The air... The flow of the entire battlefield...I can feel it all! The Sixth Order should go...over there.” He opened his eyes and whispered to Johndoe, who turned and motioned in the direction Ferenoch indicated.

“Then that is where we will go.”

He urged his troops forward, and they readied their horses for an attack.

Crunch!

Leaves crunched underfoot as the Sixth Order formed ranks. They were usually a good deal more relaxed than the other orders, but when it came to battle, there was an exceptional aura about them—an intense discipline they exuded that put all the others to shame. Ferenoch rode at the head of their lines, shifting the weight of his greatsword onto his shoulder.

“Right, then—let’s go.” He was a huge man, riding a great beast of a horse—terrifying to behold. Johndoe, on the other hand...

“Let’s be about it, then.” He blended in with the lines, indistinguishable from his fellow soldiers. “Sixth Order moving out, if you please.”

MIMORI TOUKA

THE ENEMY BEGAN to focus their attacks on the eastern flank, where Loa and

his forces were stationed with an army mainly made up of centaur soldiers and monsters.

Geo in the central area had reportedly received reinforcements from the Country at the End of the World, but immediately waved them over to the east to reinforce there instead.

“Lead the monsters you borrowed from the center back to their original position,” Niko said to me after hearing what Geo had done. “Leave the western flank to me for now. You should return and assist the other armies, with that cursed magic you wield.”

None of the Four Shining Warriors are on the eastern flank—Loa’s strong, but not that strong. I’m more worried about the east than the other fronts. Also want to get a look at what’s going on with Geo in the center with my own two eyes.

“All right,” I answered. “Stay on the defensive here for now. I’m sure you already know, but—don’t engage the Sixth Order if they show up, okay?”

“Of course.”

I took the horde of monsters back to the central area and joined up with Geo. He had pulled his troops some way south of their previous lines and set up a temporary base. I saw some of the leopardman soldiers being treated here and there—some were missing arms and legs. There were bodies, too.

Geo himself looks almost completely unhurt.

I called out to Geo, who stood firm above it all, surveying the base around him.

“If it isn’t the Leopard King,” Geo said upon seeing me, tone light.

“Looks like you’ve defeated one of the enemy orders,” I replied.

“I *am* one of the Four Shining Warriors, after all.” He looked at the injured soldiers around him in silence for a few moments. “But we made sacrifices. Still a bit concerned that we don’t have a good handle on how many the enemy’s got in the field. Haven’t seen that Sixth Order either.”

“You don’t look that bad for having fought off the enemy captain,” I

remarked.

“Wasn’t even a challenge compared to that vice--captain of yours.”

“Any recent intel from Loa in the east?”

“Sounds like they’re really hammering the enemy from the reports we’ve been getting. Guess those fresh soldiers Lise sent us are pulling their weight. Ah, also... We’ve detected a new group of soldiers heading this way. To be honest, good timing for you to bring these monsters back from the west.”

With the black, it doesn’t stand out... But his fur is thick with the blood of his enemies. Geo must have killed dozens of them already. Usually the impact that a single soldier can have on a large-scale battle is limited—but not Geo Shadowblade. It’s just possible he has the strength to turn the tide of this battle alone. How many men has he killed on his own now? I knew it—even among the Four Shining Warriors, his abilities in combat are a head above the rest. He’s being modest, but there’s no question in my mind that he’s the strongest of them.

Just the simple fact that we have him on our side will improve the survival chances of all our soldiers. It’s not just raw strength—his instincts and abilities as a leader are incredible as well.

Geo Shadowblade—he’s invaluable to us.

From a personal, emotional standpoint of course...but also as a means of keeping our losses in battle to a minimum, we need him on our side. It’s reassuring to think that I can leave this whole section of the battlefield in his charge.

“Let me say this now,” said Geo, not turning away from the injured soldiers around him. “I’m really glad you came to us...to the Country at the End of the World. Thanks.”

“Like Lise said, I’m calculating with the people I help. I’ve no right to your gratitude.”

“Even so. If you hadn’t charged off to help Niko, she mighta been killed in the fighting. With you on our side, I feel like I don’t have to hold back either.”

“...”

Geo gave a short growl from the back of his throat. “Too cliché?”

“Nah—I was just thinking about the same thing is all.”

“Eh?” Geo’s ears stood on end. “Come to think of it, there’s some intel I want to share with you. Just came in from the eastern flank from one of our scouts, interesting stuff.”

I listened with my hand on the chin of my mask as Geo delivered the report.

“...So they’re checking order numbers and the identity of all their messengers, huh?” I mused when he was done.

“The order that Loa and the centaurs are fightin’ with now were talking about it while they were on the move, ‘pparently.”

Have they figured out my trick already? But I thought we completely destroyed the order we used it against. We left no survivors, and I didn’t sense any humans nearby. I really don’t think there were any witnesses.

Does that mean one of the enemies is predicting we’ll disguise ourselves as messengers? Which would mean they’re assuming there are humans on this side of the battlefield.

“According to the scout, they think the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s out here fightin’ on our side,” Geo added.

“...I see.”

So they think Mira and the Country at the End of the World have formed an alliance, not that the Lord of the Flies Brigade is here on the battlefield.

“Guess that little trick is finished for the day, then,” I said.

Although, it doesn’t really matter whether they’re suspicious of me, so long as I can use my disguise to get within range. They don’t know anything about my status effect skills yet, but the tactic’s gotten riskier.

“Well, this works fine for us as well. Makes them suspicious of all their messengers, so they’ll be a bit slower to respond to our attacks.”

Unless they’ve got lie-detecting abilities like Seras does...

Just then, a messenger appeared.

“They’re here! The enemy knights are heading this way!”

“How many of them?”

“Around 200, from what I could make out!”

Geo turned and immediately began firing off orders. “Evacuate the wounded! Those of you who can still fight, with me!”

“I’m coming too,” I said, quickly drawing myself a mental map of the area.

We’re close to that area, right? There were spots of forest nearby...

“Geo, show me the map.”

The knights appeared from the forest, hemmed in by steep cliffs rising up beside them on either side.

“Halt.” The man in front bid them to stop.

He must be the captain.

He looked up, seeming to wait for some kind of signal from atop the cliffs. The mounted captain then stroked his beard, looking satisfied.

“We’ve got soldiers stationed up on the cliffs. As for that forest over there...”

The captain looked out at the thick forest which spread out before him—almost an oasis in the otherwise rocky terrain which characterized the area. The forest was hardly a refreshing green though—rather a dark jungle of twisting vines and undergrowth, thick trees and great leaves which blocked out the sun and left the forest floor dark and foreboding even in the daylight.

“Let’s cut to the chase...” the captain said. “...That looks like the perfect place to hide. Those sub-humans do have *some* brains in their heads, eh? I don’t need to see or detect their presence to know they’ve got soldiers lurking there, waiting to ambush us. Those beasts might be able to suppress their presence through some kind of primal hunting instinct. But we humans have intelligence that far surpasses that of any beast. That’s what sets us above them in the first place. They’re just so...”

The captain raised his arm, and the mounted knights behind him drew their bows.

“...naive.”

Fire arrows... He's going to shoot them into the forest?

Another squad behind him readied their magical devices. Just as the captain was preparing to lower his hand and give the order to fire—

“Loooo-se!”

A rain of arrows from atop the cliffs—but they weren't the order's. The captain jerked his head upwards, missing the opportunity to give orders of his own.

“What?! The enemy was waiting on the cliffs above?! Th-those devious animals! Inconceivable!”

As the rain of arrows intensified, Geo Shadowblade's voice rang out.

“Course we knew you'd think we were in the forest... Knew that'd make you station less guys up here on the cliffs, too. This fight's gonna be a bit one-sided!”

Geo tossed a spear down from atop the cliff.

Thunk!

It found its target, skewering one of the knights straight through his shield. The man next to him flew into intense panic at the sight.

“Th-the shields are useless?! Hyaaah! M-monsters...!”

“Aah, aaah—! Curses, curses, curses!” The captain howled, placed a hand to his chin and tore out a handful of hair from his beard. “Haah... Okay, that's calmed me down. Right then...”

He sighed with relief. *I guess that was some kind of ritual to calm him down?*
“Shields up! We're sitting ducks! Can't get up on those cliffs from down here. They must've taken out all the men we sent up there! Then we should make for the forest, for cover! Careful of those arrows! Let's go! Ride with me!”

With that, the captain kicked his horse's flank and his knights flooded through

the valley towards the forest beyond. Men who couldn't properly take cover behind their shields fell from their horses one after the other and were trampled, never making it to safety.

"All right, we're safe! They aren't shooting anymore!" Once they'd reached the forest, the captain slowed his horse.

One of his knights drew level with him and looked back toward the cliffs. "They took out a good number of us. That black leopardman... What should we do, captain?"

"Not bad, eh? But think about it this way—take that one out, and we're back in business."

Almost there...

"Right, then... Should we charge out at them from this position?" asked the knight.

"So long as they don't try and set fire to the forest, we stay here and watch. Might even be able to catch them in a pincer movement if one of the other orders shows up."

Not yet...

"If only we had a way of getting a message to the other orders..."

"The second and sixth might sense something's up and come in to save us. But in this forest, we can't really put all the strength our Third Order can muster to good use, eh? If those black leopardmen come charging in... We'll have to dismount, fight them hand-to-hand—just like the good old days."

"Captain, I can sense monsters in the distance. It's faint, but I hear voices..."

"Yeah, I feel it too... They ain't moving, but we'll have to take them out if they get too close. Scouts, maybe. Let's move in a bit more."

Just a little further...

"But those demi-humans... They sure got the better of us, didn't they."

"If that leopardman has a wife, I'm going to have to take her in front of him. Not gonna be satisfied 'less I do."

Not yet.

Draw them in... Until the very last moment.

The faintest sound of breathing reached my ears. I felt it all around me, the nerves shot through my whole body...

Just a little closer...

“You’ve always liked taking other people’s stuff, eh, captain...?”

“Always have, always will—life of a bandit. Don’t normally really care for the stuff, but when it’s someone else’s it just makes me wanna grab it. Just my nature, I guess.”

“Hey, that reminds me... Gray, the guy whose wife you took for your own, he killed himself, yeah?! I saw him just wasting away, day after day!”

“*Pah ha ha ha!* Man, guess I really did a number on him! But yeesh...one time back when we were bandits, we attacked this village, and he did things so messed up even I w—”

“Now!”

Rustle!

A group of leopardmen leaped up from the brush, bows in their hands.

“A-ambush! Th-they set up an ambush here?!”

The leopardmen fired.

“Th-they had this planned?! Right from the st-sta—?”

I fired off Paralyze at the targets, as the leopardmen let out a war cry and rushed the knights with their weapons.

“No, w-wait! There aren’t all that many of th—! ...Gh?! Aah?! ...I-I can’t move... M-my body...?!”

Those monsters I had stationed a little further back, waiting... I let them reveal themselves fully to the enemy, out there in the forest panting loud for all to hear. That’s what drew the enemy’s complete attention... They didn’t even notice me, or the leopardman soldiers hiding close by.

“...So naive.”

After our victory over the Third Order, I returned with Geo and his troops to our rear base of operations. We had won the battle with almost no injuries to our own troops, and without even using the monsters I had stationed in reserve. Well, I supposed we did technically use them to distract the enemy...

“...How’d I put this? When I’m fighting with you, I feel like I can’t lose,” said Geo.

“‘Cause I’m a genius,” I replied.

“You joke, but when you’re getting results like these, I can’t argue...”

“Hmph... Well, I’m just getting lucky with cheap tricks to be honest, that’s all. If our enemies were smarter or had better instincts for battle this wouldn’t go so easily.”

Against Erika, or the Princess of Neah for example... The Takao Sisters, Ikusaba Asagi... I can’t imagine they’d fall for any of these tactics.

“Having your leopardman ears and eyes to detect where the enemies are going from so far away is a real help too. I’m not putting down the other armies, but your Band of the Shining Leopard really are easy to maneuver in combat.”

“Band of the Shining Leopard ain’t only strong ’cause of me, strongest of the Four Shining Warriors. Every soldier in our ranks has gone through years of tough training. Well, hey... I’m thankful to them all I guess, for coming along—hey, looks like we got another messenger?”

“Report! Niko has found a divine beast on the western flank!”

Geo instinctively stepped forward on hearing the news.

“A divine beast?!”

“...Perhaps the Sixth Order have finally taken to the field,” I mused.

According to what Michaela told me, they’re the ones holding the divine beast.

“What is it, Dolis?”

“Hmm.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Are there any Sixth Order knights in the area?” I asked the messenger.

“N-no! They’re reporting that they appear to be from the Fifth Order...”

Geo furrowed his brow.

“You think the Sixth Order lent the beast out to one of the other groups?”

“...Or maybe the Sixth have disguised themselves as the fifth?”

“R-report!”

Another messenger sprinted towards us, out of breath and panting. He looked to have come from the center.

“The divine beast has been sighted, near the location of your recent battle with the Third Order! I did not pursue any further as instructed... H-how should we proceed?!”

Geo raised his eyebrows in surprise and looked over at me. “What’s happening? Two divine beasts?”

“R-report!” This time the messenger appeared to be from the east—from Loa.

“Loa and the centaurs, after fierce battle with the enemy on the western flank—the Eleventh Order have been pushed back! Our losses appear to be minor! In addition...”

Don’t tell me...

“Our scouts moved into the area following the enemy retreat—and are reporting sightings of a divine beast!”

“Another one in the east?! What’s he doing there?!” Geo wrinkled his forehead in frustration.

How many divine beasts do they actually have? No—this probably isn’t for real. It’s some kind of trap to bait us in—using our main priority of capturing the divine beast against us. I did think this was possible and talked to Niko about the possibility when I went to reinforce her army. She knows—and knows well enough not to pursue the enemy too far. That gives me some relief... But I

should send out fresh orders just in case.

“Send this message to all fronts at once: Do not pursue any enemies that may appear to be the divine beast until further instructions are given. Focus on defending. There’s a high possibility that this is an enemy trap.”

The messengers sprinted away to the east, north, and west.

Before long, our forces on the central front lines began to retreat, and messages began to return from the east and west. The western flank’s report was the first to come in.

“G-Geo ... Lord of the Flies! Lord of the F-Flies!”

“Hey, you’re not supposed to call him that when he’s wearing th—,” Geo began to scold the messenger, but I raised a hand to stop him.

He’s panicking—he’s not going to remember details like name changes at a time like this.

Up close, I saw how pale the messenger looked and urged him to continue. “Your report. Please.”

“Lady N-Niko is...”

Just then, another came.

“Report!”

This time it was a message from the eastern flank, breaking in to interrupt the first with the news that Loa was avoiding chasing the enemy and had moved his lines back. He had not reflexively followed.

All right. Loa’s making calm, reasonable decisions here.

“So—what news from Niko then?” Geo asked again.

The messenger from the west was shaking uncontrollably—he looked as if he might collapse at any minute.

“I don’t want to have to ask you again—what’s happening in the west?”

Geo closed in on him, the pressure of his presence was intense. But still the messenger did not speak—as if it were something simply too terrible for him to speak out loud. In the meantime, I called over a few leopardman soldiers who

could administer first aid.

“Take us there,” I said when I was done.

“I’m coming too,” said Geo, laying a hand on one of his katana.

“You can’t. I need you to stay and lead the central forces here.”

“...Tch!” As Geo gave me the report, he ground his teeth, then turned to try to corner the messenger again. “Then at least tell me... Niko... What happened to Niko?!”

“Y... Th-th.... Th...” The messenger could barely speak coherently—but somehow, eventually, managed to get the words out.

“Th-the Sixth Order.”

I took several leopardman soldiers with me to the west—led by the messenger to the place he said he had seen them.

“Ah...”

He stopped in his tracks, and a female leopardman soldier by my side swallowed hard. She covered her mouth with both hands and froze up—seeming unable even to breathe.

“Ah... N-no... What is that...?”

“N-no way... It can’t be...”

“Leopard King... Is that... Is it... What is that...?”

The sound...

...Bzzz, bzzzz...

...Of flies’ wings.

...Bzzzz, bzzz...

It’s effective—really effective. Truly so. Is it fear, to destroy my will to fight? Anger, to cause me to lose control in battle?

I don't care either way anymore.

Yeah, that's right.

I can do this. If I put my mind to it—I'm capable of it.

If that's the effect I'm aiming for.

They did it—they went this far.

"Lady Nikoooooooooooo—!"

"Quickly." I turned to one of the medics behind me and stretched out a hand.
"Scissors."

"Y-yes...!"

"Everyone!" I shouted my orders, bringing everyone back to their senses.
"Hurry up and cut them free...!"

Niko walked the forest with a group of several dozen of her soldiers, all of them dragonkin. She walked at the front, with a kind of message board hung from her neck with rope. Both her hands were bound, and she had weights on her legs that dragged behind her as she walked. Some of her soldiers had arrows in their backs or shortswords still embedded in their arms.

But there was something worse—something far more brutal.

Hands, arms, tails... There were dragonkin body parts that looked to have been taken from the dead... And they were attached to the survivors with some kind of thick thread or string. They were sewn tight to the remaining soldiers' arms, legs, mouths... Some of the soldiers had their eyes sewn shut...others had the eyeballs gouged from their heads.

I cut the threads, careful not to touch any of the dragonkin soldiers' injuries.

"Piggymaru, you sense anyone nearby?" I asked as I worked.

"Squee-ee!"

Nobody Piggymaru can sense—meaning there likely aren't any enemies in the

area. There'd always be the danger of Niko being used as a distraction for an ambush, but that doesn't seem to be the case—for now at least.

“Squ-queeee...!”

Piggymaru was wobbling with rage. The leopardman soldiers I had brought to help were retching as they went about cutting off the dead limbs—some were vomiting too.

Snip!

“B-Belz-egea!” Niko had been made to bite down on the tail of one of her fallen comrades as a gag—she spoke as soon as I cut her free. I no longer cared whether she used my pseudonym.

“What happened?”

“W-we chased them.”

Snip!

“The divine beast?”

“One of our soldiers called out...said once we captured it then this whole battle would be over. They ignored my attempts to stop them and went after the divine beast. I...I could not leave them to die. What you see here is the result of my failure to make your warning clear to my men. I could do nothing but pursue my soldiers, to try to help.”

Snip!

She couldn't leave one of her soldiers to die, then.

Niko was trembling, her body and mind completely ruled by fear.

“Lord of the Flies...don't blame them, please? They...they didn't want anyone to die either. They wanted to end this war here! That's why, I... I... I mean, I tried t-to...”

Her clear dragon eyes began to overflow with tears.

She's one of the Four Shining Warriors, Cocoroniko Doran. Most of the time she speaks like a military commander, abrupt and unshakable. She has herculean strength, swinging around that greatsword that's far too big for her

hands. But even so...

Snip!

She's a kind young soul—easily hurt, and yet I still feel such strength from her now.

“The decision I made...it put everyone on the western flank in danger... *Hic...* I sent the monster unit in retreat, but the Band of the Shining Dragon... *Sob...* We were completely routed...”

Snip!

“The Sixth Order—was this them?” I asked.

“*Sob...* Yes. They called themselves the fifth, but...it was a trick. They hid their order number from us. But while they were doing *this* to us, I heard them talking... I... Before we knew what was happening we were surrounded. Before we even had a chance, they...they overran us completely! I-I couldn't tell what was happening...”

“Niko.” I kept working while I spoke to her.

Snip!

“What has happened to you and your forces here is terrible.”

“...”

“Terrible, but...” *Snip!*

I cut the final thread. “I'm glad you're still here, alive with us. Truly I am.”

...

...The Sixth Order.

After we'd finished cutting the body parts from the survivors, untying their bonds, and removing the weights from their legs, we gave them what first aid we could.

They're going to need more treatment once they're behind the front lines though.

We didn't have enough soldiers to carry the wounded, so I sent for a messenger to call for reinforcements. As the wounded were being treated, some of the leopardmen just stood there in shock, while others looked as if they were losing the will to fight.

The shock of this must be too much for people from the Country at the End of the World.

I took the message board that had been strung around Niko's neck and looked at it in private. Nobody approached me to speak or showed signs of walking over. The message was for the other orders—instructions not to harm Niko and her soldiers, as they were to be shown off to the enemy.

So even if Niko had been found by the other orders on her way here, they wouldn't have killed her.

The board also included a recommendation that the people of the Country at the End of the World surrender, written out neatly in official and formal language.

As I read on, however, I saw the tone clearly begin to deteriorate. The words lost their formality the longer the message went on, and there was a primal violence shining through instead, as if the author had started off strong but gotten tired of the facade halfway through.

"We're gonna follow you wherever you run! Make you beg for us to kill you! Forever, we'll follow you, wherever you go! You've got no other options left! Either kill the people you love, or kill yourself! Looking forward to your response!"

Hard to think this was written by someone with a good head on their shoulders... No, maybe I'm reading it wrong. This was written to make the reader hate—to fill them with fear and make them seethe with rage. These words are calculated to have a psychological impact on them.

...But this is tough for me to understand. If they managed to leave Niko and some of her soldiers alive, why not use them as bait to lure us in? "Give us what we want, or we'll kill your hostages..."

But they didn't choose it. It was the best practical way they could have used

Niko and her soldiers, but they didn't do it. Why?

Did they just do all these things purely because they wanted to? It would've been much more effective for them to make use of these soldiers as hostages—but the Sixth Order chose to prioritize the psychological effect that their injuries would have on us. They're provoking us—choosing to satisfy their own sadistic desires above all else.

That's the only way I can interpret this.

Not to mention this message... The words radiate absolute confidence. Arrogance? No—not that. They're treating it as a well-known, accepted fact that the Sixth Order of Alion has no need to use cheap tricks like taking hostages... That their victory is inevitable, no matter what we try.

That's why they're throwing away their advantages like this, carrying out this depravity instead.

...And it's working.

The psychological effect—stirring up emotions and causing anger to overtake the calmer, reasoned thinking.

Yeah—it's working. Almost too well.

I wasn't able to conceal my rage—some of the leopardman soldiers around me could clearly sense it. It was putting them on edge to see me that way, making them feel uneasy.

I'm the one here leading them, giving the orders. It's not right. I'm failing them by showing anger. But even so, I...I don't have it in me to let this pass. It makes my blood boil just thinking about it.

Setting aside what's right and wrong—I just don't like it. They've irritated me with the way they've done things here. That's it, plain and simple. More than anything else...

"It pisses me off."

That's how you want it, Sixth Order? Then I'm going to corner you. I'm going to make you beg for death.

I took a deep breath and beckoned one of the leopardmen over.

“Ah... Yes! Wh-what can I do for you?!”

“Call for my vice-captain. *There’s nowhere left for you to run.*

I’m going to destroy the Sixth Order.”

Seras arrived on Sleis back, and we returned together to the center of the battlefield where Geo was stationed. Reinforcements then arrived, and the wounded dragonkin were taken to the rear for treatment.

It was then that Geo learned about what had happened to Niko—needless to say he was enraged beyond words, immediately trying to head off towards the western flank alone. Not even several dozens of his fellow leopardman soldiers could hold him back, so I put him to sleep.



“Sleep.”

The leopardmen around Geo looked worried. I reassured them nothing was wrong.

“Don’t worry, he’s just sleeping. I can wake him up whenever I need to.”

Geo’s men were also horrified to learn of what happened to the Band of the Shining Dragon.

When the wounded are right here being treated, there’s no way to hide that, I suppose.

Seras came to stand next to me, a tightly focused and grave look on her face. “...I heard what happened to Lady Niko.”

Her expression was filled with sorrow, and she bit her thin lower lip but didn’t say anything further.

Maybe seeing how angry Geo was just now made her calm down a little... Well, not like she’s doing a much better job of hiding the rage that’s burning inside her either.

“There’s no clean way to go about killing someone. We’re killing people too. But I couldn’t care less about any of that... I don’t like the way that Sixth Order fights, and that’s reason enough for me.”

I’m not going to harp on about justice or ethics. I find what they did unpleasant, and that’s what makes me want to stop them—my only motive.

“But hey, that doesn’t mean I’m going to let my anger take the reins and do anything reckless. That Sixth Order are strong—smart, too. A *weakling* like me is really going to have to use strategy to drive them into a corner and then put them down.”

First, I talked with Seras about the course I planned on taking and had the leopardmen soldiers I would need prepared while we discussed our plans. *They’re eager to help—passionately so, even. Above and beyond.*

I felt like a vessel for all their hatred towards the Sixth Order, as they channeled those emotions into me. I looked down at the Lord of the Flies mask in my hands.

“...By any means necessary.”

“Squee?”

“Hmph... I’m going to get this done, no matter what.”

“Everything is prepared, master.”

I mounted Slei with Seras, and we rode past Geo to dispel his Sleep effect before we left. He was in a daze as he awoke, but quickly regained consciousness and tried to tell me something... Just as he tried to talk, *she* called to him, and it seemed to calm Geo’s rage somewhat.

“It’s best that we leave the Sixth Order to them, Geo.”

“Tch. You’re wounded, Niko. You should be asleep.”

“Not when I can still fight.”

“Don’t be stupid. You’ll get yourself killed.”

“Geo.”

“What?”

“When we encountered the Sixth Order out there—I felt we had no chance of victory. Those men were evil in a way I cannot properly comprehend. I felt a fear which pierced me to the core. But at the same time...there was another feeling inside of me too.”

Geo was silent. I could still just faintly hear Niko’s voice as we rode away.

“That on our side, we have *that man*.”

“Fight evil with evil, eh?”

“This fight to come against the Sixth Order was beyond our control. Instinctively I knew it.”

“Huh? What the heck’s that?” asked Ferenoeh.

“Those shadows look like people. It seems...they are carrying something,” replied his sentry.

“Hmmm. So the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s finally here?”

“No? They do not appear to be human.”

“So they’re demi-humans? But there’s only two of them!”

“Well...I’m sure I’m mistaken about this, Sir Ferenoch. But th—”

Ferenoch stood up. “That’s a Lord of the Flies Mask, ain’t it? Don’t tell me—!”

“But what would that man be doing here?”

“Who knows! Hey, you over there! Stop! We’re the Sixth Order of Alion, y’know!” Ferenoch waved his hands above his head. “We’re scared of that cursed magic of yours! Keep your distance now, will’ya? Cap’s orders, any closer and I can’t guarantee your safety, ’kay? See that thin li’l moon-shaped boulder over there? That’s as far as you come! If you’re really the Lord of the Flies Brigade, we want a word! We ain’t gonna hurt you...yet!”

I was dressed in my Lord of the Flies garb, and Seras was dressed as the Fly Swordsman with her spirit armor already equipped beneath. We stopped by the boulder he’d indicated. The rocky area we found ourselves in was so quiet, it was hard to imagine there could be a battlefield just over the ridge. All the knights we could see were on foot, their horses tied up close by. It looked like they were resting—on a break, perhaps.

They’re relaxing... After everything they’ve done.

There was still blood on their armor from the soldiers they had slain. There was no sign that the Sixth Order were about to make a move.

So it was them... But there are likely different orders closing in on the other fronts—I want to finish this as quickly as possible.

The area had clear sight lines all around, with no obstacles to block my view.

It’d be basically impossible for them to have an ambush hiding in such a wide open space like this. They’re too far away for me to attack them with Piggymaru’s tentacles—and there’s always the danger that they’ll run out of range if they get suspicious of us linking together. It’s also something I can only pull off once in a fight. It eats up way too much MP for constant use. That ability’s a trump card—saved for when I know I can end this. Those soldiers they have at the front are holding bows. We can hear each other fine without

shouting, but they aren't in range of my Paralyze ability yet. They aren't giving me the opportunity to strike.

That man must be Ferenoch... He fits Michaela's description of the vice-captain.

Still... I can't find a real opening with him or any of the other soldiers. They're clearly different from the other orders we've faced. Are there less of them here because this group is made up of elites? Even at a distance, I can tell that every one of those soldiers are experienced veterans. I could fit each and every one of them into a Paralyze without hitting the target limit though. That's a small blessing.

There was no sign of the divine beast among them.

But the divine beast could put an end to this war. Do they know that—is that why they've stationed them somewhere else? And which one is Johndoe anyway—where's the captain?

Johndoe—his lack of distinguishing features is what makes him distinctive.

The distance is making it hard to tell... I can't see anything from all the way over here. Ferenoch has a real presence about him—the aura of someone truly strong... But none of the other knights around him are giving me the same impression.

Ferenoch walked forwards towards us, leaving over 30 meters' distance between us.

It's like he's been told to put at least 20 meters between us at all times. Huh...

"Knights of the Sixth Order of Alion, I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Belzegea, leader of the Lord of the Flies Brigade," I said by way of introduction. "From what you just told me, Ferenoch-dono, am I to understand that the captain of your order is not presently here?"

"Eh? Yeah, yeah, he's here." Ferenoch pointed behind him. "That guy in the middle of the pack's Cap'n Johndoe. He's leaving the negotiating to me for now though—cap's just gonna be watching you for now."

The man was average—surprisingly so. He had such little presence and was

such a true background character I didn't notice him until he opened his mouth to speak.

“A pleasure to meet you. An honor, in fact. As Ferenoeh says, I am captain of the Sixth Order, Johndoe, if you please.”

So that's him...

Chapter 2:

The Twisted Mirror

SERAS MADE THE COVERT SIGNAL to me that the man was lying.

...Or maybe not.

That man isn't Johndoe at all. The real one is likely blending in with the crowd, one with the "rest" of them. He's probably watching us right now, standing in the perfect position to observe us. Of all people, I should know.

But which one is he?

I scanned the crowd, but the entire Sixth Order had their eyes trained on us...

The mask comes in handy at times like these—makes it harder for them to work out where I'm looking. But I can't afford to be complacent. I have to act as if I don't know that what they're telling me is a lie.

"Right, then, first question's a big one!" began Ferenoch. "What's the Lord of the Flies Brigade doin' on this battlefield in the first place?"

"We thought the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's head would make a nice souvenir."

"Wait..what?!"

"In the recent battle, we managed to defeat an Inner Circle demon of the Demon King's armies, but also learned all too well the truly terrible power of that Demon King Essence which their forces employ. We decided that such enemies should be left to the Heroes from Another World."

"Go on..." said Ferenoch, folding his arms.

"In the Battle for the White Citadel, we sided with the Sacred Alliance. The Demon King is an evil which *has* to be defeated... What then should I do to help the Sacred Alliance achieve this goal? I thought about that for a time, then news reached me of the Mira rebellion."

"I see, it's all startin' to come together—"

“As head of the Sacred Alliance, what is Vicius-sama’s chief worry? I decided it must be Mira and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.”

“You got a point.”

“And it appears that the forces of Mira have allied themselves with this Country at the End of the World.”

“Cap’s already figured that one out. But...we ain’t got no guarantees that you’re on our side, do we? Maybe you’re lyin’ to us, and you’re really on Mira’s side. Words are just words, people can say whatever they like.”

Johndoe’s impostor picked up the line from there.

“If you’re really on our side, we will require some substantive proof of that fact.”

“I imagined you might,” I said, shifting the sack I held on my shoulder into my hands. “Please, take a look at these.”

I scattered the contents out onto the ground. The knights of the Sixth Order reacted immediately. Seras swallowed.

“Man, I’m shocked. Well hey...this is pretty strong evidence.”

“Proof indeed...” Johndoe chimed in.

There were body parts of leopardmen strewn across the dirt before me... Severed hands, ears, fingers, teeth, and even tails... All of them fresh.

“These are just a few of the leopardmen I killed on my way here. It appeared your sister orders were having some difficulty with those in the central area. They were tough opponents—much more experienced in combat than the other demi-humans. We should continue to be wary of them as this battle continues.”

“Ain’t been many leopardman corpses around, eh? Even the reports don’t talk ‘bout ‘em. They’re strong, yeah...but you’ve had no trouble takin’ ‘em out?”

“Just in case... Allow us to check that those things are real,” said the fake Johndoe, sending a single soldier walking towards us.

“Vice-captain... If this is a trap and they kill me, be sure ‘n’ pick up my bones,

will you?" said the soldier, looking back over his shoulder.

"Sure, sure, we gotcha."

So he is wary of that possibility—but not scared.

The soldier stopped in front of us and looked down at the severed body parts of the leopardmen. After he was done, he turned back and waved at the rest.

"These things are real! Real blood, too! Looks like these leopardmen were cut up in battle! Got some defensive wounds on 'em as well! Nothin' shaky or shallow either, so they can't have done it to themselves. All of 'em look kinda different too. This ain't just one of the beasties cut up for parts!"

"It would be quite unconvincing to have just one... I did my best to bring as many as I could. Heads are so heavy, I chose only the parts easiest to carry."

"Your logic makes sense," said Johndoe.

"C'mon back now!" Ferenoch called to his soldier.

They exchanged a high-five as he rejoined the ranks.

"I was lookin' at the girl next to him... The way she flinched when he emptied out that sack o' bits... You didn't tell her 'bout what was in there, huh?"

"She's still a little sensitive about such matters."

This is one part of the plan that could give it all away. I didn't want Seras to be worrying about her reaction this whole time. That's why I decided not to tell her.

Well, that was one of the reasons at least.

"I would have doubted you if those body parts were those of dragonkin soldiers, not of leopardmen. We got fresh dragonkin soldier corpses all over this battlefield by now."

I knew it. I could never have gotten away with showing them dragonkin parts and pretending to have severed myself. It wouldn't have deceived them.

I felt myself lucky to have a mask over my face, hiding my expression from view.

I worked... I did it.

I felt victorious, and in that moment—I knew full well it was written all over my face.

I never planned on using this as a strategy—not at first, at least. I recalled the moment it happened—just after I had sent the angry Geo to sleep with my status effect skills.

My mind was racing at full speed, as I sat silently trying to think of a plan. Suddenly, two leopardman soldiers called out to me. One of them was missing a hand, and the other I had seen somewhere before—it was the soldier who had gone to find Seras for me when I asked for her.

“You said you were going to destroy the Sixth Order, didn’t you? You’re going off to fight them?” he asked.

“I am, yes.”

“I have a favor to ask you. I don’t know how you plan on approaching them. Would you be willing to tell me?”

I didn’t understand why the soldier was questioning me, but there was something in his eyes and tone of voice that made me realize.

He has an idea.

I briefly talked about the ideas I had for tackling the Sixth Order.

“I’m still working out the details though,” I said finally. “I still feel like I need something else... One more thing to get me in the door.”

The two soldiers’ eyes met, and they exchanged a determined look with each other before turning back to me.

“We have an idea.”

I grunted when they had finished explaining their idea. “Well... It does sound possible, yeah.”

“This thing with the dragonkin, it’s really gotten us angry. We really... We want to make them pay for what they did.”

The leopardman soldier’s proposal was a surprising one. They suggested I

take the missing body parts of injured soldiers and display them to the Sixth Order as my own personal trophies of battle, in order to make them believe the Lord of the Flies Brigade was on their side.

Come to think of it, the Lord of the Flies Brigade hasn't formally revealed itself on this battlefield just yet.

"Many of our men have been injured in battle. We've lost hands, ears, fingers... Others, their lives."

"So you want me to take their severed body parts in order to infiltrate the enemy's ranks...?"

This strategy wouldn't work with the dragonkin soldiers. There are lots of their corpses on the battlefield—the enemy is just as aware of that fact as we are, they're the ones responsible for it. But the leopardmen... The Sixth Order don't know about them yet, and their fatal casualties are far fewer. If these two soldiers can gather the number of body parts they claim—that'll also make it hard for the Sixth Order to claim I've just harvested them from corpses.

"They should see the wounds and know these were injuries sustained in battle...!"

"But this plan, it—"

Am I disgusted by the thought of doing this? It sure seems like it. It's just too much... I...

"This hand I lost...all it can do now is *rot*. But it might be able to help you defeat those bastards! I can't do much to help avenge the dragonkin comrades we've lost...but this I can do! I can feel like I've helped! Please, I beg of you!"

Other wounded soldiers began to gather around me.

"P-please take ours as well! If this severed ear of mine can deal a blow to the Sixth Order, then use it!"

"It's a way for us to go with you in your fight against them...!"

I turned to look at Seras, who was looking in on Niko some distance away. She seemed to have no idea of the conversations I was having.

...If we're going with this plan, it might be best if Seras knows nothing about it.

It'll draw a more natural reaction out of her when the time comes. The way that ignorance will cause her to act—it can be another way in which we deceive our enemy.

“All right.”

“L-Lord of the Flies! Thank you so much!”

“Come on, guys...”

“Oh, yeah, L-Leopard King... That’s right. *Ha ha...*”

“But be quiet about this, okay?” I gestured at Seras. “Especially don’t let her catch on... She won’t be able to accept that we’re using tactics like these right away. Not emotionally, I mean.”

“Ah, I see...”

Well, I do have another reason for hiding it from her, but... For now, that’s enough. With Seras’s emotions to consider, it’s best if I go ahead with this plan on my own.

“Ahem... And sorry,” said one of the leopardmen.

“Eh?”

“From your reaction to my idea. I...I can see you aren’t enthusiastic about doing this, are you?”

“...Not really, no. I think it’s going to be effective, but... It’s a bit much.”

“You...” There was a sadness in his tone of voice, and the soldier looked down at the ground. “When the tragedy happened to Niko... You were more angry than any of us, weren’t you?”

“I’m sorry about that. I probably made you scared with the way I looked... I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“N-no! The opposite...”

“Hmm?”

“To tell the truth, I... I was glad to see you like that.”

“Glad?”

“At first I was scared... I was terrified to even approach you. But then I realized something. You were angry on our behalf, weren’t you? For the things that happened to us demi-humans.”

“ ... ”

“When I had that thought, it...it made me feel glad for some reason.”

I looked around and saw the way the other leopardmen were looking at me—there was kindness in their eyes.

“It’s exactly because you are the way you are, that we thought to come to you with this plan. Because we know you’re a kind person. There are other kind humans like you in the world. So we...we can’t give up on meeting more of you—of living together in peace someday.”

I prepared my things to leave, still deep in thought.

They’re eager to help—above and beyond.

Leopardmen. Victory is yours.

“Right then, guess you’ve earned some trust.”

Seras looked to me, wearing all her Fly Swordsman gear. I nodded at her, and she nodded back.

“I won’t doubt you. I trust you,” her look seemed to say.

...Amazing that we can exchange so much information between each other, even when we’re both wearing these masks.

I took a step forward.

“Whoa now.”

It was the impostor Johndoe who called out for us to stop.

“Is something wrong?”

“There is one more thing... I do understand the reason you have joined us on this battlefield. But there are other orders here. Why have you chosen to come to the Sixth Order in particular?” The man fixed me squarely with his gaze.

“In fact, I met Michaela-dono.”

Ferenoch raised an eyebrow at that. “Eh? Michaela? He ain’t dead?”

“When we found him, he was with his First Order of Knights, caught in a trap the demi-humans had laid for him. We saved his life in that moment of crisis—he claimed himself to be commander of all the Thirteen Orders of Alion, after all.”

“So...Where is he now, huh?”

“We rescued him, but...abandoned him some time later. I believe he was killed by the enemy shortly afterward.”

“What the heck did you just say?”

“To be perfectly honest, I was disappointed in him. That the pride of your nation, the Thirteen Orders of Alion, could be led by such an incompetent man. I was shocked.”

“So that’s why you left him to die? That’s savage, man!”

“No, allow me to be more direct: I knew that his presence would be nothing but a hindrance to us. He was far too incapable to be commander. It made me curious, in fact. Interested to know how powerful the famed Sixth Order of Knights truly was. And so, I came to see you with my own eyes. Well... I do also have other reasons for wishing to meet with you, however.”

Hmm, maybe I shouldn’t mention the divine beast yet—don’t want to make them suspicious.

“Heh heh heh. Michaela’s dead then, eh?” Ferenoch laughed. “Relief to hear that, really. If you’d started singing his praises, it woulda really made me worry about you. Nice work.”

I could tell from the moment I said Michaela’s name that Ferenoch didn’t like the guy.

“I’m relieved to hear your reaction as well. I can clearly see that your order is leagues more impressive than theirs. The reputation of the Thirteen Orders of Alion truly does rest entirely on your shoulders, it seems.”

“I see. Ferenoch, I’m satisfied with his answers,” came Johndoe’s reply.

“Oh, right, right. You told us your secret, I’ll tell you ours. The Goddess actually wants us to get the Lord of the Flies Brigade on our side, y’know? She says we should like, take you home with us if you’re willin’ to come along.”

Ah—now it all makes sense. From their first words, I could tell they wanted to talk to us... Like they were trying to explain their situation. I never expected them to be so strangely calm so I did have my suspicions, but now I get it.

That foul Goddess... She’s got her eyes set on our Lord of the Flies Brigade, slayers of Inner Circle demons and wielders of cursed magic. But it’s not to destroy us, but recruit us.

Was it the defeat of the Black Dragon Knights that started all this?

The Sacred Alliance lost a lot of its military forces in the recent battle with the Demon King. The Goddess has less pawns at her disposal...not to mention now she has the Mira rebellion to contend with. That rotten Vicius just wants to replenish her stock of minions. In the past battle, she decided that we’re allies of hers—but if we refuse the invitation to join her, she’ll likely come to destroy us as obstacles to her power. If it seems like we might prove useful, however... She wants us as subordinates.

The Lord of the Flies Brigade also counts Seras Ashrain as one of its members—more material with which to draw the Princess of Neah closer to her—that foul woman is probably thinking about things from that angle too, knowing her.

Wait a minute. If I use this opportunity well, then I might be able to use this to get close to that foul Goddess.

At that moment, we stepped into range of the Sixth Order.

They’re in range of my skills—but still not all of them. I need to be able to hit every one of them with a single attack. I have to get closer.

“So, anyway... You wanted to come see how strong we are, but what’s the other reason then? I gotta hear this.”

...Got him.

“I heard rumors told concerning a certain dark elf village. I came to confirm them.”

I wanted to avoid bringing that up myself—that's why I sneaked a hint about it into conversation earlier and waited for them to bite. Makes it less suspicious if they ask the question themselves.

"Dark elf village, eh?"

"Does the name of the Shanatilis Clan mean anything to you?"

"...Ah, them? Yeah, I remember. Long time ago now... What about 'em?"

"Our brigade has quite a deep and fateful connection to their clan... We were hoping to get revenge against them. To be more precise, revenge sought by one of our members—Seras Ashrain."

I motioned to Seras next to me.

"So *that's* Seras Ashrain? Famous high elf beauty that used to be captain of Neah's knights?"

"Do you know why she came to Neah in the first place?" I asked.

"Dunno. Hear she was pretty quiet 'bout the whole affair, yeah?"

"She was driven out of her home country, the nation of her birth. And those responsible for that were a certain dark elf clan."

"The Shanatilis Clan, I take it," said the impostor Johndoe.

"I see, it's all comin' together. Can't blame her for hatin' them then. But, cap'n..."

"Yes. We of the Sixth Order destroyed the Shanatilis Clan. Now you're here, Sir Belzegea, your visiting us to speak of this matter, must mean..." Johndoe looked at Seras, and she spoke to him in response.

"Yes. We learned of your deeds... And came to determine the truth of them."

She picked up where I left off. "We confirmed as much with Michaela before we abandoned him, but wanted to meet you all in person nonetheless. And to at least thank you all, before we left this place."

Seras's words were lies, but there was still a faint bitter tone to her voice.

It must be hard for her to talk about things like this—I shouldn't make her speak any more than necessary. But well... They might mistakenly interpret her

tone as bitter regret over being driven from her homeland, I suppose.

“Honorable, ain’tcha? Yeah, we’re the ones that wiped ’em out.”

Now we’ve got their word.

“But if that’s what those dark elves were up to, we should’a hurt ’em a bit more, huh? Cap’ did say we messed up by killin’ ’em too quick.”

Seras took a knee. “I feel as if a weight has finally been lifted from my shoulders. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, for all you have done.”

I gave a short bow as well.

“In fact...Seras mentioned wanting to *thank* each of you individually.”

“Yes. Not with words, but with actions. ...To express my gratitude towards you all,” she said as she got back to her feet.

The soldiers’ reacted to that.

Some of them swallowed—there was a distinct change in the way they were looking at Seras’s body. Others were ogling her, almost to the point of drooling. This was a reward they hadn’t expected, it seemed... I could even see Ferenoch struggling to maintain his composure.

“Seras Ashrain is gonna do something for us...?”

“The beautiful and famous Princess Knight... Wh-what’s she gonna give us?”

“*Gulp...* You don’t see that kinda enticing body on a woman every day...”

“I want to see her face.”

Only one man’s reaction remained unchanged—the *real* Johndoe.

That’s a mistake on his part, I think. If he’s going to really become one of the background characters—really be underestimated by his enemies—he should be reacting the same way as everyone else.

“I only wish to thank those who actually participated in the attack on the Shanatilis Clan, of course,” Seras broke in. “I cannot thank any of you who were not present.”

“All of us participated,” said the impostor Johndoe, interrupting her. “The

reason our Sixth Order has become such a small concentrated group of elites is because we have never replenished our ranks. The purity of the whole is lowered when newcomers are introduced... This is the philosophy of our order.”

Ferenoch grinned and narrowed his eyes at Seras.

So, all of them participated in the attack—that settles it.

Seras placed her fingers to her Fly Swordsman mask. “Understood.”

All eyes were on her, the woman whose beauty was spoken of far and wide across the continent. They all waited in anticipation to see her in the flesh, and for the mysterious acts of *gratitude* that were to come...

Seras removed her mask. She lightly shook her hair free and looked towards the knights of the Sixth Order.

On her face was an enticing expression which did nothing to impinge on her elegance and grace—a look that would steal any man’s heart. A true power in its own right.

She smiled sweetly at them.

“Well, then. I, Seras Ashrain, would like to take this opportunity to...”

Ferenoch realized something was amiss. “Kill those two at o—”

“Paralyze.”

“...thank you all from the very bottom of my heart.”

Looks like Ferenoch was just a touch too late.

“Sir Too-ka.”

“Hmm?”

“I... Ahem...”



“What’s up? Something troubling you?”

“Not especially, it’s just... Am I *really* so beautiful?”

“Oh, come on...you know that answer already. What’s this really about?”

“*Heh heh*. I should have known your answer. I have something else I’d like to ask you about.”

“You too?”

“Huh?”

“It’s... It’s nothing. So, what is it?”

“Well, ahem. Would my face and...the allure of my body be capable of attracting the enemies’ attention? To distract them, perhaps? I... I am asking from an objective standpoint of course...”

“It might work depending on how we go about it. But these kinds of tactics aren’t your style. Are you sure?”

“With the grave nature of the acts these men have committed...just this once. I simply cannot allow them to go unpunished.”

“You mean what happened to the Band of the Shining Dragon, huh?”

“And the Shanatilis Clan too. The things the Sixth Order has done are unforgivable.”

“Never thought you’d suggest that tactic on your own, though.”

“*Heh heh*—perhaps it’s your influence on me.”

“No need to let me sink in too deep. You’re fine as you are. It’d be a shame to change too much.”

“But with regards to this strategy...”

“Sure. If we’re going to be using that beauty of yours, then we should hide your face under the Fly Swordsman mask until the perfect moment to strike—make it as effective as we can.”

I’m confident that Seras can pull it off.

Ferenoch had no time to react as he and all the other members of the Sixth Order were caught in range of my Paralyze skill. Everyone except me had their eyes on Seras, completely enchanted by her smile. They were captivated—their hearts stolen completely away.

The rare beauty, the high elf Princess Knight, Seras Ashrain... She gave them the performance of a lifetime.

When we saw Niko and the other soldiers trudging through the woods, she didn't let any of her emotions rise to the surface. But just like those injured leopardmen back at camp, she can't let the Sixth Order get away with this. She wants to defeat them—even if she has to bend her own rules to do so.

“Wh...at.. Wha-aa... Is this...?”

Nonlethal mode, on.

“Poison.”

Not so mighty now, are you?

“Y-you... g-goin' t-to... b-betray us.... h-here... Ghhehh...”

Doesn't matter how strong you are—as soon as my skills are on you, it's over. Doesn't matter who the real Johndoe is either—everyone's snared in the same trap. This distance—capturing all of them together at once, to end each and every soldier with one blow.

No need for a struggle... No fight to the death.

Feint, deceive—ambush. Snare them with my strategy, and that's the end of that.

That's what these broken status effect skills are capable of.

I quickly took out a sound sphere to send up a signal.

“We did it, my master.”

“I-is something wrong...?”

I'm missing something. Something's strange. Something...

“...Ferenoch.”

The one who realized my intent to attack and reacted first was their vice-captain, Ferenoch. He was the first to catch on—he even had time to give the order to kill us both. We were faster, of course, but he was the only one to react so quickly to the change that came over us in that moment.

...The only one.

But wait. If the real Johndoe is truly among them—why didn't he react as well? Is he slower than his own vice--captain? Is it just that Ferenoch happens to have faster reflexes?

None of those explanations make sense... Or am I just overthinking this? Have I already caught the real Johndoe in the range of my Paralyze skill?

No. I don't think I have. I can't shake this strange feeling that something is off.

"Seras, be careful of our surroundings."

"Eh? Understood."

"Piggymaru, watch my back."

"Squee!"

The terrain here gives us such clear lines of sight over the surrounding area. There's nowhere to hide—nowhere for the enemy to lay in ambush. We'll see any attacks before they even get close.

A super long-range attack maybe? I think Seras should be able to react in time to deflect it. I think I'd have time to use Slow as well.

But looking at this situation from a different angle...

"Seras."

"Yes?"

"It's possible their captain Johndoe isn't here. He never was."

"R-really?"

"No sign of the divine beast either. There's a chance they're somewhere else, acting independently of the rest."

To the enemy, that divine beast is their one key to opening the door to the

Country at the End of the World.

“You mean to say the Sixth Order have been used as a decoy so that Johndoe could make his way to the door?!”

“It’s a possibility.”

With things as they stand... I should finish this lot off quickly, and head back as soon as I c—

Without warning, a man now stood roughly five meters from me.

Th-this man... He... Where did he come from?

The moment I detected his presence, I instinctively moved my hand up towards him and...

When? When did this happen?

When did he get so close? At this distance...

“Tch.”

“Sle—”

A clear, clanging sound rang out. The split-second that Seras’s sword met his, parrying—the man disappeared, just as their swords clashed in the air.

“—ep.”

I finished speaking the name of my skill aloud, but the man... He was *gone*.

“Paralyze!”

I fired in front of me, to the left and right, then behind... But no sleeping or paralyzed men appeared. He had disappeared completely.

Where did he go? Is he sleeping or paralyzed, and I just can’t see him?

“Are you okay?!” Seras called out, sword in her hand.

“Yeah... All thanks to you.”

Did he just pull away from us with incredible speed...? I activated my Sleep skill as soon as I detected him—but he was gone before I managed to finish saying the word... He disappeared in an instant.

“Your reflexes saved my life,” I told Seras.

“I could only barely parry his blow thanks to the strength of my spirit armor. To be perfectly honest, his speed was terrifying. It even made me doubt my own eyes.”

“He was way too fast—you’re right about that.”

I scanned the area, but there was no sign of him.

Not like there’s anywhere to hide around here though...

“Piggymaru, what do you think?”

“Squ-uee~...”

Piggymaru didn’t seem to sense him either.

“Seras.”

“My apologies... I detected no indication of the man’s presence.”

She’s right. It’s almost as if... He doesn’t have a presence. Teleportation, maybe?

We can’t see his physical form, but if he’s within range I might still be able to affect him. That’s the whole reason I blindly fired Paralyze skills around the area just now. But the enemy has known about the 30 meter limit on my “cursed magic” all along, haven’t they? So, even if the target’s nearby, he’s keeping at least 30 meters away. The main problem I’ve got is actually detecting him as a target. Every skill of mine except for Slow requires me to actually have a target I can recognize in range, that I’m aiming at with the palm of my hand in order to activate.

Recognition → Say the skill name aloud → Activate.

Those three steps have to go in order.

Even assuming this guy is teleporting around, with how fast he can disengage, it’s too late for me to target him once I’ve recognized that he’s there.

What do I do? Should I guess where he's going to show up and preemptively fire off a skill? No, that won't work. The problem is that recognizing him as a target has to come first.

“...So this is Johndoe.”

Thankfully for us, Seras seems to be able to parry his attacks—if just barely. How are we going to go on the -offensive then?

Linking up with Piggymaru...I can't say that sounds all that effective. First, the risk is too great that he'll notice the change in color and be wary of the danger. He could just retreat far from my reach as soon as I activate that ability. This enemy we're facing counters all my status effect abilities too perfectly.

Getting eyes on him is a huge problem in its own right—I can't even tell if he's here or not. Looking for footprints is useless—the Sixth Order have already covered this whole area with tracks of their own. Trying to detect sound has issues, too. The rest of these murderous bastards' moans are masking the faint sounds of the enemy breathing.

But even with the sounds of them rolling over and groaning, I should have been able to pick out his footsteps. Does Johndoe have some ability that can even suppress those sounds as well?

That would make some other strange things fall into place too. We can't see the enemy's sword or gear—it's like everything about Johndoe, including everything around him, is undetectable. Like his existence is being blocked from my consciousness.

Don't tell me... I can't even see his footprints in the dirt, right there just five meters away from me?

“Seras.”

I explained my analysis of the situation to her in brief.

“This is either teleportation... Or an ability which blocks out Johndoe's presence completely from our minds. Do you agree?”

“But if he's teleporting himself towards us, it must be from some distance away—there's nowhere to hide nearby. He should be here somewhere,

watching us from afar...”

But from that distance—could he even get a good look at us before moving in to attack?

“I think the presence-blocking theory sounds most likely,” I said.

“Yet... He did show himself to us when attacking.”

“That means...” I thought for a few moments. “Maybe his ability doesn’t work when he’s within a few meters of his target, or something? I think there’s a good chance that’s it.

Otherwise, there’d be no point to him dispelling his ability as soon as he got close. That seems likely.

His presence...

Yeah. If we think about the nature of his ability as having something to do with his presence, that’s something that becomes harder and harder to disguise as you get closer to someone. His ability must be capable of diluting his presence to its very limit. To make it so his enemies aren’t even aware of his very existence.

What the heck... He’s turning himself into such an extreme NPC, it erases his existence entirely?

I got in close to Seras and whispered in her ear, “These Sixth Order knights are going to be *obstacles* to him—make it harder for him to find a way in to attack us. We might be able to use them to limit him to just a few different paths towards us.”

Seras lowered her voice, never turning to face me as she spoke. “You’re right.”

In any case, our main problem is how incredibly fast he’s able to withdraw after an attack. We won’t be able to beat him until we figure out how to counter that.

I touched Seras’s back—the signal that I was about to use my Slow skill.

Anyone within a meter or so of me can move normally during Slow’s effect. That also goes for anyone who’s “connected” to me in some way—like the way

that Piggymaru's physically connected to me now. The little slime can move normally and won't be slow to react no matter where the enemy comes from. Seras will move slower once she steps over a meter away from me—limiting how far she can move and swing her sword if she wants to stay in range.

I placed a hand to the shortsword at my belt.

Or if it looks like I can put him down, that would be fine too. The issue with Slow is that I can't use my other skills at the same time... But skills I applied before entering Slow do still continue to tick down their durations.

The Sixth Order knights around me continued to moan.

Another problem is the large amount of MP it consumes. The effect ends once 5000 MP worth has been used up, and then there's a cooldown time before I can use it again. But right now I need time to strategize safely—5000 MP worth of time, at least.

"Slow."

This will make me safer, let me concentrate. I can use this time to examine the enemy's abilities and come up with a way to beat them. Seras could also be able to cut down Johndoe while he's slowed. I wouldn't complain if that happened either.

"Status Open."

I looked at my stat screen, watching the MP tick down...

Your move, Johndoe.

JOHNDOE

JOHNDOE COULDN'T care less about the Sixth Order.

That Lord of the Flies, though...he's too dangerous.

The Princess Knight reacted quickly enough to parry me. Her reflexes are faster than his—but that man...he reacted before he could even detect my presence.

That one's dangerous.

The way the Lord of the Flies had spoken to Ferenoch, Johndoe knew he had been telling the truth... Right up until the moment he had used his "Paralyze" cursed magic on them all. Johndoe usually felt strange when someone lied to him—a faint, practical kind of instinct of his. There was no deception from the Lord of the Flies. Not even a trace.

He must have believed every word—speaking as if he truly did intend to join us as friends. The man deceived even himself. He's special. He's abnormal.

He would have tricked me too, had it not been for Seras Ashrain's reactions alerting me to his lies. That Princess Knight is not as elegant a liar as he is. She's a pure soul I suppose. It must have been difficult to truly force those words of forgiveness from her mouth.

Johndoe could have saved the Sixth Order the moment he detected their lies—sneaked up behind the two of them and tried to kill them both—but he did not.

It's more important to understand this unknown power of his...his cursed magic. It was only in abandoning the Sixth Order that I was able to truly see his strength and to know more about the cards the enemy holds before making my move.

Don't I care at all for the order, one might ask...

Not at all.

We have fought together until this day, but something unfortunate has happened to them—that is all.

Johndoe had no qualms with being completely alone on the battlefield. He had no desire at all to take revenge for his injured brethren. They'd served their use and helped him in determining some new information about the Lord of the Flies' cursed magic. As he watched Ferenoch and the other knights frozen in place, moaning and suffering, the spectacle caused only one thought to come to mind.

Well done. That Lord of the Flies has got the right idea.

I was right to have the divine beast wait in a different location. Maybe the enemy will be made wild with rage after what we did to the Band of the Shining Dragon. One of the Four Shining Warriors has already been defeated. It's possible they'll now send all their forces at the Sixth Order in an attempt to stop us. There could be a group of elites from the Empire of Mira on the way, given that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is on their side. I could use the Sixth Order as a decoy, and take that opportunity to accompany the divine beast to the door alone. We could kill all those inside. Once whoever they consider their king is dead, the people of the Country at the End of the World will have no way of making decisions for themselves.

Not a bad idea.

And yet...

Something occurred to Johndoe, that he hadn't at all expected. He had an instinctive feeling that he could not suppress.

The Lord of the Flies—I must finish him here. He's the same as I am.

We're similar. We're alike—almost identical.

There are ways in which we differ, of course. But the Lord of the Flies...there's something in his essence that feels so very similar to mine.

He had never felt this way before. Not even in the presence of the Civit Gartland, with whom he shared blood.

I thought it was just me—that I was the only one who was like this. But there are others. I can't believe there are others like me.

Johndoe felt like he was going to be sick. Nausea crept up in him.

What am "I" doing over there? An enemy, no less? I've never met anyone like him before—someone so much like me.

It's like watching myself moving about, beyond my control.

He felt disgusted, physically ill, dizzy.

Should I dispose of him later?

I can't allow it. Can't allow that...thing to exist a moment longer. So long as

that man is alive, I will never be free of this gross feeling. I know it.

No. It must be now. I must kill him as quickly as possible. I'm going to throw up. I have to do it, here and now. But I cannot lose my calm. I must stay composed, relaxed.

Maintain concentration, no matter what. Too much confusion will interfere with my ability to "Recognition Block" and will dispel the effect. I have to avoid that at all costs. I must endure.

Johndoe swallowed the vomit in his mouth.

I have to examine him closely. He is an enemy who possesses the same qualities as I. There's no doubt that he's exceptional. He'll come for me in time. He's strategizing at this very moment. I know it.

...Look at him. He's already thought of something.

Cursed magic.

It doesn't matter how much I understand about the nature of those tricks of his, he'll try and use them somewhere. It's not as if I've confirmed what each and every one of them is either. If he's going to use cursed magic, it'll be a new spell...something he knows I haven't seen yet.

They were able to block my attack earlier. It appears this

nausea and dizziness are dulling my edge in combat. I'm sure that will improve as the feelings settle, but I can hardly wait here quietly for that time to come. I should test their skills and reactions with light attacks. I can learn much from their responses. Stay wary for my own safety, and continue the attack, searching for weakness.

Killing one so similar to myself is a kind of suicide, is it not?

Laughable. But, no... I don't find this amusing—not one bit.

MIMORI TOUKA

"SIR BELZEGEA!"

He's here. He's shown himself.

I knew it—none of those skills I blindly fired off managed to hit him.

Then he was gone again—disappearing just on the edge of the range of my Slow effect. Right before he concealed himself again, Johndoe took a step back. He retreated.

That bastard. He must've sensed something was wrong as soon as he got in range.

Suddenly there was the sound of a sword slicing through air and the clang of metal on metal.

He threw his sword at us from his hiding place. The projectile was affected by my Slow aura and Seras struck the blade down when it got close.

He's trying to figure out what's wrong—how it is that my Slow effect works. At this rate, my 5000 MP are just going to count down to nothing...

But something strange happened with that attack just now. When he first attacked us it was from around 5 meters away... But just now he revealed himself right on the edge of my Slow effect, much farther away than before.

There should've been no reason for him to show himself there. There was no advantage to doing so. Why? Did his ability wear off for a moment?

Is he getting flustered?

I imagine experiencing Slow for the first time can be surprising, sure. He's also the kind of opponent who can understand in an instant just how its effect works. That's how smart Johndoe is, and the reason he pulled back so quickly.

Does it take a lot of concentration for him to keep appearing and disappearing like that, maybe? Did something about being in range of Slow throw him off balance? Can I dispel his ability if I just cause enough mental stress for him to break?

If that ability of his requires him to concentrate, that should also make it harder for him to give attention to other things around him.

With Johndoe's first projectile attack, it appeared as if he completely understood the nature of my Slow skill. He continued to throw several more

swords, all of which Seras parried. Then the attacks stopped.

I looked down at my stat screen.

Time's up.

5000 MP had been expended, and the Slow effect around me and Seras was dispelled.

With the cooldown time on this skill, I won't be able to use it for a while longer.

The standoff continued. All that my ears could pick up were the wretched groans of the dying Sixth Order knights around me...

Whoosh.

Another sword came flying at us. Seras struck this one down as well.

It wasn't slowed this time, though. That was an attack to check if the Slow aura around us was still in effect. But thanks to Slow, I feel like I've been able to understand our enemy's abilities as well...

The key to this battle might just be throwing a complete curve ball at the enemy. If I can just use that opening his ability gives me to turn the tide.

Then there are those three.

I searched my mind for a certain memory.

"Seras."

"Yes."

"Our defense. Can I leave it up to you?"

"Yes. After all..." Seras's frost sword swirled with ever more mist surrounding it. "...I am your knight."

He appeared behind us.

Seras reacted almost immediately, twisting her hips around and raining down a series of flowing slashes towards the area where she had sensed his presence—effectively defending us both from further attacks.

Johndoe's sword met hers for a moment, and I...

“Da—”

...began to use Dark.

It's one of the weaker skills I have, and it isn't a good finisher. It's meaningless if the enemy's able to fight with their eyes closed for instance. But as the skill I've got with the least number of syllables, it's also the fastest.

Even so, Johndoe was gone by the time the last sound left my mouth.

...But not even Dark is fast enough, huh?

Visual recognition and Pointing my hand towards the target. I need to meet both these conditions before saying my skill name out loud. My skills do tend to land even if the aim on my hand is a little bit off center.

Visual recognition → Orally enunciating the name of my skill.

There's a bottleneck, no matter what.

Johndoe continued his attacks, and Seras barely managed to fend them off.

“Sque-ee!”

Piggymaru tried desperately to detect where the attacks were coming from as well.

With an invisible enemy, I'm wary about watching my back. But it seems like Johndoe understands that as well, and he's mixing in attacks from the left, right, and front as well.

It feels like my senses are defective. After he disappears following an attack, I can't feel any presence at all around us. It's like he's flickering between existence and nothingness.

It was that moment that I realized something odd about him, and once again—he appeared.

Two blades bounced off each other.

So that's how you want to play things?

“Ah?!”

Seras managed to react in time to block the slash—but only by a hair’s breadth. She was just barely hanging on.

“Are you okay?”

“M-my apologies. Our enemy is somewhat troublesome.”

“Your eyes?!”

That bastard... He stepped on one of his own soldiers as they lay on the ground to crush their skull and send blood and gore spurting up into the air. All that must’ve narrowed Seras’s field of vision, and now there’s some of the blood splattered into her eyes.

Seras lowered the visor from her forehead down over her eyes and locked it into place with a click.

Been a long time since I’ve seen her fight with that thing on.

“I will be okay. What I see with my eyes is not all I am able to perceive—I can do this.”

Seras blocked his next attack deftly.

“Da—”

I see this a lot in battle manga. A character’s other senses are honed because they aren’t relying on their sight anymore—they become more sensitive to the presence of the enemy. But now there’s someone right in front of me, actually doing it. This has to surprise Johndoe a little. Make him stop for a second, and...

“—rk.”

...Too late, again.

Johndoe had already retreated. There was no opening to exploit.

None of my status effect skills are going to make it in time, are they...

“Tch.”

He’s fast.

The way he withdraws the instant after a strike. It’s like he’s attacking and

retreating in the same instant, in one movement. I've never seen anyone pull back so quickly before. It's not just his ability to hide himself, his speed is a powerful weapon on its own.

But with that attack just now... I think I know it for certain.

Johndoe.

You bastard.

If this guy has a weakness, now I know what it is.

JOHNDOE

T*HE LORD OF THE FLIES. I had no idea he was an enemy I could so little afford to underestimate.*

When he had cast his cursed magic upon the impostor Johndoe and the rest of the Sixth Order, the Lord of the Flies had never let his guard down, not for a single second.

If he had only savored his victory in that moment—if he had let his attention slip—I could have finished this.

As Johndoe watched, he saw his enemy searching for a path toward beating him as well.

I'm sure he already has a fair idea of how my ability works. But I know more about him now too. There are conditions—steps to activating that cursed magic he uses.

It was also clear to Johndoe that the enemy wasn't keeping up with him. They were managing to respond to his attacks, but the only one with the reflexes to do so was the Princess Knight.

And she's got her hands full with just defending her master and herself.

Johndoe had crushed the head of a Sixth Order soldier in an earlier attack to spray blood into the Princess Knight's eyes, but it appeared she was capable of fighting well enough without sight.

There's no hesitation in her stance—she doesn't need to see me to fight. Lucky I've got her pinned on the defense. Then there's that slime lurking in the Lord of the Flies' robes. It doesn't seem to be a monster well suited for combat. It must be a lookout, to watch his back. Looks safe to assume it doesn't have any fighting abilities for the time being.

The enemy will try and attack me with his cursed magic. He's waiting for the moment to strike me with it.

After several of Johndoe's attacks, the enemy finally made a move.

"Can you keep up with me?"

"I can."

That was all of their conversation that he was able to catch, but Johndoe had some rough speculation about what their plan might be.

They've realized something.

He crisscrossed them with slicing attacks, then retreated in the same movement.

It might appear to them as if I'm teleporting around.

His attacks continued, and Johndoe focused his attention on understanding his enemy's abilities. Not just that, but their habits, speed, and form. He used his attacks to shake them and draw out their responses.

"Squee."

...There it is again. What's that noise?

Johndoe continued his attacks, flitting in and out of visibility.

"Squee. Squee!"

The slime cries out each time I attack.

Their two blades clashed, echoing out in the clear open air around them.

She just managed to block my attack, but... Is she getting faster?

Attack.

"Squee."

Attack.

“Squee-ee-ee!”

The strange squealing continued.

It appears that those cries... They're in sync with the Princess Knight's movements. Sometimes it's one, at others two or three squeals.

Has the Lord of Flies grasped something already? Is he aware of my attack patterns now? Has he truly read me in such a short amount of time?

Johndoe kept up the offensive.

I see. I get it now. Those squeals really are in sync with the Princess Knight. The Lord of the Flies is using them to tell her something.

The Princess Knight's reactions had now gotten so much faster, it was impossible to ignore.

At this rate, it's not unfeasible she might catch up to me. What do they know? It's hard to know your own flaws with nobody to point them out.

That slime's cries—what are those signals telling her? There's one thing I know for certain—there's a connection between them. They've standardized their own movements by tying them to my attacks. This is going to make them easier to read. There are openings that this strategy of theirs is going to present to me.

I know what they're trying to do. The Lord of the Flies has figured out my attack patterns—the way I tend to approach them. He's using his slime to give signals to the Princess Knight—that's what they were talking about a few minutes ago. Seems that those signals are assisting her in countering my blows, more and more as time goes on.

That slime's signals are only preparation for what comes next.

Johndoe had been watching the Lord of the Flies closely the whole time.

He's trying to force an opening to use his cursed magic. That's the way he'll try to finish this, I'm sure of it. The Lord of the Flies is the one I should truly be wary of. He must be plotting something else while I'm focused on working out this signal scheme.

I know it because we're the same.

But... What now? How is he going to cast his cursed magic on me? It appears he needs to say the full incantation to activate it. In addition, he seems to need awareness of my presence and to point his arm towards me. Understanding this about his magic makes battling him easy. I need only move in time with the speed of his abilities.

Most of all—the enemy has misread me. They've played right into my hands. They aren't the only ones preparing for something big.

The attacks Johndoe had been launching against his enemies weren't the fastest that he could use. They had been deliberately planned, suppressing his own speed in order to deceive the enemy into thinking he was weaker than he was.

I couldn't be any faster with my first attack—but now I can speed up. Just a few minutes ago, the nausea and dizziness faded. Now I can move at my full speed.

But Johndoe did not. Instead, he continued to keep the speed of his attacks in line with his first. Soon he would finish them off with one decisive finishing blow.

It's almost time to finish this. The Lord of the Flies is going to try to deploy his cursed magic against me.

This has been a close call.

Johndoe breathed a sigh of relief.

With that mask, I can't see his expression. But I don't need to see his facial expression to know how to read him. I know this enemy's thoughts like they are my own. I can synchronize my mind with his, almost. That's how I know how dangerous he is.

"Seras," the Lord of the Flies spoke. "From now on, I need you to follow me exactly."

"Understood."

"Seras Ashrain."

“Yes.”

“Are you... Are you willing to sacrifice your life for me?”

“Yes. Of course.”

The Lord of the Flies stuck out his hand and assumed a battle stance. “Thank you. I appreciate your resolve.”

Johndoe studied him closely from his invisible vantage point.

I know he's aiming at something, but I can't let my guard down. Can't let anything past me.

That hand of his...

His thoughts...

All the nausea and dizziness were completely gone from Johndoe's head, as he silently planned the attack which was to be his last.

Inside, Johndoe was filled with admiration.

So this is it, Lord of the Flies.

Johndoe leaped in range of detection to attack, but he understood everything as soon as he swung his sword.

When the Princess Knight blocks, they know I'll withdraw as soon as our blades meet... Meaning the Lord of the Flies' cursed-magic won't work in time. I'll escape by a hair's breadth—but he won't make it.

But what if the Princess Knight were to be cut down?

He thinks he can strike me in time.

Seras Ashrain showed no signs of blocking the attack—no movements to raise her sword.

She's going to let herself be hit so the Lord of the Flies' cursed magic can find its mark. Creating a pattern, then breaking it...a strategy for creating an opening. He's losing an ally to defeat his enemy. A strategy for catching one's opponent off guard—for creating an opening. He's breaking the pattern now—

forgoing the usual defensive moves she would take.

But Johndoe wasn't shocked by the gambit.

He whispered to himself over and over in his mind: *I know. I know you're the same as I am.*

Johndoe felt as if time had stopped—as if he were seeing a clone of himself in the flesh before him.

Yes... We're both coldhearted enough to abandon our allies.

"Are you... Really willing to sacrifice your life for me?"

Those words the Lord of the Flies just spoke...he's right. That's who we are. You're going to finish me off with that cursed magic, even if it takes sacrificing the Princess Knight to do so. Just like I was willing to sacrifice the whole Sixth Order just to observe you and your cursed magic.

But you'll curse it soon, Lord of the Flies—curse the fact that we are the same. I've already read your thoughts.

Johndoe had already switched targets without a moment's hesitation—he recognized the enemy's goal, and almost as a knee-jerk response was already closing in on the Lord of the Flies instead.

"Da—"

I've seen through you. That opening you were hoping for will never come.

He made a brief feint toward the Princess Knight before slashing out at his real target—the Lord of the Flies.

Slash.

"..."

What?

They g-got me...?

"—rk. Paralyze...!"

Pull back. Retreat...

I can't move.

This cursed magic prevents the target's body from moving, doesn't it...

Finally, in that moment—Johndoe turned his attention to the Princess Knight.

“Got you,” said the Lord of the Flies, looking relieved, as if he had just laid down a heavy load he’d been carrying for hours.

“Holding back on moving at full speed... You know you aren’t the only one who can do that, right? Most of all...” The Lord of the Flies glared at Johndoe as blood spurted from his wounds.

“Just as I planned—you couldn’t keep your eyes off me.”

MIMORI TOUKA

PARTWAY THROUGH our battle, I got a strange feeling. It seemed as if Johndoe was focusing all his attention on me.

Seras was the one blocking his attacks, but I was the one that his eyes were always fixed on. Did he think I was plotting something? He must've thought of Seras as merely a shield, not a sword...

I noticed a small change in Seras herself as well. She was gradually getting used to Johndoe’s attacks and responding to them faster. I used some of my mental resources to strategize while Seras focused on her direct confrontation with Johndoe.



Did he get a vague sense of it, I wonder? An omen of what was to come... Of Seras Ashrain's genius in battle.

Those three said it too... The former Strongest Man in the World thought she might someday be a worthy opponent. The strongest bloodsport gladiator, Eve Speed, recognized her genius. Even Geo Shadowblade acknowledged this high elf Princess Knight's extraordinary talent...

Since the fight against Civit, Seras has developed and grown as a warrior. She might not have the showiness of others, but she's always working hard improving her incredible talents and speed. Seras has been with me—been there for me—through all the tough battles we've faced so far.

The Elite Five, Ashint, The Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, the golden-eyed monsters, the humanoid monsters, the Demon King's armies, the Sword of Courage... We've made it through it all together.

So, halfway through our battle with Johndoe, I decided to place all my hopes in her. To stake everything on the talents of my vice-captain.

First, when Johndoe disappeared, I whispered to Seras, keeping my voice as low as possible. His awareness blocking was dispelled when he was within 5 meters or so. That meant we always had a 5 meter radius to work with. There was no danger of him listening in on us if we whispered quietly enough.

I'd also just activated my Slow ability. He was cautious it seemed, and was keeping his distance. Much higher probability that he was somewhere far away.

I observed the patterns to Johndoe's attacks and the gaps he left between them. At first they appeared random, but there was always a certain amount of time before his next attack would come. It was as if he was thinking about something after each blow...likely trying to figure us out with repeated strikes.

So, I took the opportunity to talk with Seras in private—mostly eliminating the possibility that Johndoe could be listening in. I spoke, and Seras listened. My mouth was hidden by my mask, but Seras wasn't wearing hers, and it would've looked unnatural for her to have put it back on to talk. She gave me non-verbal signals in response, just like she always did when she told me someone was lying. Seras understood exactly what I wanted of her immediately.

We've got good chemistry together, I guess you could say.

I told her of my plan to conceal my true speed, intending to finish Johndoe with one blow as quickly as I was physically able.

"Seems like he's fixated on me. Worth a shot, I think. Don't worry—I'll get everything ready."

Seras gave the signal that she understood, but I saw she still looked anxious.

"Don't be nervous. This doesn't have to work. I'll think of our next move if it comes to that. But I want to bet on you. Civit, Eve, Geo—all of them have recognized your abilities—and I know your abilities are the real thing. You're a true genius in combat. I'll tell you as many times as it takes. You're the best vice-captain I could ask for."

With those words, all of Seras's anxiety seemed to melt away. She was ready.

I used Piggymaru's cries as a distraction to draw the enemy's attention away. The little slime's squeals also served to hide the noise of the whispered messages I gave to Seras. I motioned to Piggymaru inside my robes with my fingers to give it orders—to cry one, two, or three times whenever Seras made a move.

Seras wasn't in sync with Piggymaru's cries at all. Piggymaru was just following her movements, but it suited us best if the enemy misread the situation and thought it was the former. In reality, Seras was using her own senses and speed to adapt to Johndoe's attacks.

I hadn't figured anything out about him, and Piggymaru's cries weren't some kind of signal or anything, but I knew that it might lead Johndoe to believe I had some kind of read on his attacks. My main aim was to try to draw as much attention off Seras as possible, to block his recognition of her existence, just as our enemy was blocking his own presence.

I also kept up a casual act the whole time, staying aloof and making the enemy think I was plotting something.

"It's not going to be Seras... I'm going to finish this," I said with my every action. I wasn't too blatant though either—I made a show of trying to hide my false intentions.

With the information I'd gathered, I had a fair idea of the enemy's character. Johndoe was a thinker. A cautious and careful fighter who was always trying to read his opponents' inner thoughts.

There was a good chance he'd conclude Seras and the slime were a diversion, to draw attention away from the Lord of the Flies. But that was his downfall... Like a trap card, placed face-down... When your opponent has one on the field, it makes you think they've got something held back in reserve.

By focusing all his attention on me, Johndoe failed to even conceive of the fact that Seras might be hiding her true speed. Then his twisted morals made him willing to believe I would sacrifice Seras just to seize victory. He was willing to abandon the Sixth Order like it was nothing—it was more than possible he'd believe it.

"Are you... Really willing to sacrifice your life for me?"

I made sure to say that loud enough for Johndoe to hear it—but even then, my preparations for the finishing blow were in place.

"From now on, I need you to follow me exactly."

"Exactly" was the word signal to Seras. The time had come for her to finish Johndoe—for her to make the decision to attack whenever she felt ready. That's the reason she let her defenses slip.

"He's letting Seras be cut down to break the pattern in my attacks and create an opening for him to use his cursed-magic," Johndoe might have thought.

And in the end...it seems he fell for it, hook, line, and sinker.

Seras Ashrain was almost completely out of his sight line when she attacked. She moved even faster than Johndoe himself and cut him, which seemed to distract him even more than her being willing to sacrifice herself.

The wound was so deep, his usual quick retreat looked out of the question.

"Dark."

He wasn't going to make it in time.

My fastest skill connected. He was unable to concentrate, with the injury on his mind, but he still tried. This time, I wasn't going to let him get away.

Whether due to injury or panic, he wasn't retreating as fast as before. Before he made it 20 meters away from us, I chose the skill with the highest chance of stopping him in his tracks.

"Paralyze! Got you."

You were right, Johndoe. I was always the one that was going to finish this. I don't know why you were so singularly focused on me, nor why you chose to continue the attack instead of retreating with that incredible ability. But well...

"Holding back on moving at full speed... You know you aren't the only one who can do that, right? Most of all..."

The reason you lost this fight...

"Just as I planned—you couldn't keep your eyes off me."

Johndoe was frozen, one knee to the ground—motionless.

Still some distance between us. He can't see, either.

"Seras." I placed my hand on her shoulder and squeezed a little. "Good work. I was right to count on you."

Seras swallowed and cleared her throat—*she must've been nervous.*

I felt the tension in her shoulder relax just a little as her visor raised with a clunk. Now she could see normally.

"Thank you. But this was your plan."

"I'm always telling you... Strategies aren't worth anything without people capable of pulling them off. This isn't my victory, it's *ours*. You too, Piggymaru. Nice job."

"Squee~. ♪"

"...Right then. Might as well check. You're able to talk a little, yeah?"

"...Y-yes."

And willing to talk, apparently.

"You're the real Johndoe?"

“Y-yes.”

“You can’t use your ability to disappear?”

“N-no.”

“Any magical devices?”

“N-none.”

“This battle... You think you’re capable of turning it around?”

“...? N-no.”

I looked at Seras—she saw no sign that he was lying.

“Y-you...can see through lies t-too... C-convenient...”

He’s observant, eh?

“I’ll make it so you can speak. I might even give you a clean death, depending on how you answer my questions. Unlike these guys.”

I looked around at the moaning Sixth Order knights surrounding me as I dispelled the paralysis effect on Johndoe’s head.

“Where’s the divine beast?”

“...I left him at a different location, if it pl—ah, who cares anymore.” Johndoe stopped himself and started again. “...He’s off somewhere else. Didn’t want to lose him in the battle by accident, that would force us all to retreat...”

“Where is he?”

Johndoe gave up the location surprisingly willingly but didn't seem to know if the divine beast would still be there.

“I ordered him to join the ninth unless I returned there by the specified time. I kept the window short, there was never much leeway. Even if we’d never fought, I’d only barely have made it there in time to collect him.”

I checked my pocket watch.

“Meaning if we head there now, he’s gonna be gone, huh?”

The divine beast is probably already on the move, headed to join up with the Ninth Order. But... What’s wrong with this guy? Has he given up on living

already...?

I steeled my resolve.

“I want information... Spit it out.”

“I’m going to. It’s coming.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t take it... I’m going to...” Johndoe vomited. I saw globs of blood coming up too. “You’re going to kill me. I... I know, because you are who I am. But that doesn’t matter. I’m killing myself. Nobody else but me. Not a bad way to go. Can’t say I find it amusing though...”

He...he thinks I’m him? I see. This is one of those “we’re the same” bits, huh? I can’t say I don’t see the resemblance... The way he’s refined the art of being a background character, for one.

“What you people did to those dragonkin... That’s what provoked the soldiers on our side. Didn’t work out too well for you, huh?”

“That’s not how it really is.”

“Eh?”

“In the end, it’s all you, Lord of the Flies.”

“...”

“You’re here. That’s why those of the Country at the End of the World can fight. You may try to deny it, but those are the facts. That Princess Knight beside you can hardly say different.”

Johndoe asked no questions—nothing about why I was siding with the demi-humans, nor the gamble I’d taken in our battle against him.

“Might as well ask. The Shanatilis Clan, and what happened to those dragonkin soldiers... Do you feel any regrets?”

“Seems like you’re real obsessed with that group of dark elves, but that was a failure, you know. I ended up killing them normally. I was still young—lucky for them.”

“...”

“The dragonkin soldiers were Ferenoch’s idea, I just went along with his proclivities. I never had much interest in needlework... There was nothing spontaneous about it. Nothing to force those demi-humans against each other—to make them hate, to mentally torture them, or drive them to suicide. It was boring. Merely meant to provoke the enemy. Pathetic.”

Seras looked confused by Johndoe’s words. It was as if before she could even find the emotions for anger—she failed to comprehend what he was saying.

...But I get it. I know what his fetish is now.

“You’re disgusting. You sicken me.”

“I’m sure that Princess Knight doesn’t understand... But I knew you would, Lord of the Flies.”

“That triumphant attitude of yours is gross, too.” I looked down at my pocket watch again. “But we don’t have all the time in the world here. Spit out everything you’ve got—and I’m not talking about vomit here.”

Johndoe gave me all the information I asked for—he was disturbingly agreeable. It was almost anticlimactic. I sensed he was ready to die.

I could hurt him, could make him suffer, but his mind is already made up.

He has no hopes for his future. Or perhaps he just thinks that there’s no way out, no path to survival when he’s faced with fighting “himself.” Most of all, that wound is deep. Nobody could save him with how much blood he’s losing. He’ll die before long. That explains some of his smug satisfaction...

“This is what I wanted. I do somewhat regret not receiving my final reward from the Goddess, but I lived a more than enjoyable life. Dying here will also free me from thinking of you. If I die, if I disappear...the unpleasant-ness will end with me.”

Johndoe continued to give up the intel I asked for.

The way he talks about this, it sounds like he’s getting away with it. I feel like nothing I say could ever rattle with him. I can’t think of a single thing—nothing that could affect him the way thinking of my foster parents can affect me.

“...What?”

There were four pieces of information that caught my attention.

The first was that he had been ordered by that foul Goddess to assassinate the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. The second, that the aim of that rotten Goddess's whole invasion was to destroy the Forbidden Words Clan. The third...much to my surprise...was that he was the half brother of the Strongest Man in the World, Civit Gartland. That really threw me for a loop.

But it was the fourth bit of intel he gave up that concerned me most of all.

"Tomohiro Yasu?"

He's here? On this battlefield?

From what Johndoe said, it sounded as if Yasu was in no condition to fight—they had abandoned him on their way, and he claimed there was even a possibility that he was already dead.

Then there's no need to worry about dealing with him immediately. I think I got my answers.

I looked around at the Sixth Order knights, squirming in agony.

They can wait. But it feels to me like Johndoe is dangerous, even now. If I don't take him out while I have the chance, he could complicate things in the future.

"Johndoe. It's time."

When he responds to death and suffering with such indifference—I can't find any satisfaction in doing this. I can't gloat or say this serves him right. Well... doesn't matter how I feel about doing it anyway.

For a split second, the corners of Johndoe's mouth curved upward.

"But—now I understand."

"Eh?"

"How you defeated Civit Gartland. The way you surpassed me in combat today, manipulated me. Seras Ashrain, too, must have attained his level of strength by now."

I gave Johndoe a confused look, which he returned.

"Come to think of it... You said you're Civit's brother, yeah?"

“Half-brother. That unexplainable strength of his...it all comes from our mother. Her family name was Einherjal. That blood of hers is the source of our strength. Civit and I were on the same level, you see. No...with my awareness-blocking ability, I suppose I would’ve had the advantage. What is it, Princess Knight?”

“It’s just... I... I believe you are mistaken.”

“What did you just say?”

Seras looked over at me, then back to Johndoe. “When we did battle against the Elite Five led by Civit Gartland, it was my master’s plan to defeat him that helped us overcome the vast gulf between our combined combat strength and his. I...I felt it in my skin when we faced him down...the true strength of the Strongest Man in the World.”

“...”

“I...I thought then that I could become stronger, I might one day close the gap between myself and him. I know I am much more powerful now than I was that day, yet even so...” With a twinge of regret, Seras laid a hand on her chest. “The stronger I become—the further away he seems to me.”

I feel the same. Civit’s still so far away.

I thought I could approach his strength... But the stronger I become, the more abnormal his abilities appear.

How did I ever defeat him? Sometimes the thought flashes through my head before I go to sleep. The stronger I’ve become, the more those doubts have grown. I don’t think it felt like this immediately after I killed him. I think Seras must be the same. The stronger I grew...the more I realized his strength was unnatural.

“And so, well... In terms of strength, I do not believe that you and Civit Gartland are on the same level.”

For the first time, Johndoe’s face twisted in agony.

“You were fast, yes... But I was capable of blocking you—even counterattacking once I was used to your movements.” Seras bit her lower lip.

“Were I to face Civit Gartland in close combat today—I do not believe I could defeat him. I would have to focus all of my energy on defending against his attacks, and even then...”

She can't stand to lose. I don't need her to say it—it's written all over her face.

“Yeah. Johndoe... To be honest, if you had the strength that Civit did, then that first attack of yours would have killed me. Seras couldn't have blocked that.”

I'm not lying to him—it pains me to admit it, but this is the truth.

Johndoe's face creased up. For the first time, there was a new expression there.

“Then what...” he said while grinding his teeth, eyes bloodshot. “What was the secret of Civit Gartland's strength...?! What in the world was it?!”

“Hey, I want to know just as much as you do.”

I see... He's never faced off against Civit directly before, not once. That's why he didn't have a proper idea of his strength. He thought of himself as another “Strongest Man in the World” right there alongside his half-brother. Even if he was usually holding himself back to fade into the background, he believed he could beat Civit if he gave it everything he had, especially with his awareness blocking ability.

But he was wrong. Now that false belief of his is crumbling. There was an unbridgeable gap between Civit and Johndoe—and now he knows it.

This guy's twisted. He doesn't care about being killed by someone he considers the same as him... But can't accept not knowing the secret of Civit's strength?

Ah, I see. I think I kind of understand. He isn't afraid of the things he can comprehend. As someone he considers similar to him, I'm not scary. Civit wasn't either, when he thought he understood the mystery of his origins. But now...Civit is an incomprehensible unknown to him once more.

“If not our mother, then... His father? B-but his father was... Mother described him as an ordinary former noble... I-I researched them once myself... *Pant, pant...* In his family tree, th-there was... N-nobody of such strength... Th-then

how could he be so—*ghfph?!'*

Johndoe spit up more blood, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

He's getting close.

Blood began dripping from the corners of his eyes as he spoke.

“We... W-we...We’re on the same level, a-and I could’a beat—*ghph?! ...Him* any time I wanted to...! I’m n-not gonna l-let some... O-other *m-me* shake my —*hack!* N-not going o-out... Like... This... *Gphf! Ghfh!*”

Blood oozed from his mouth, bright red and viscous. It foamed as he spoke, dripping through the gaps in his teeth. He looked heroic almost as if Johndoe were crying tears of blood.

“B-but... Y-you... Lord of the Flies... You’re goo—*hphf!* I accept y-you! K-killed by m-myself... Suicide... I d-don't mind it...! *Ghfha?! B-but... I-I... C-Civit... C-Civit... I can't understand him! H-he's even g-grosser th-than you are?! Phhf!* I-I'm... L-like a sh-shadow... Hiding... Unders-standing... Watching... Enjoying...! I had the st-strength to be the st-strongest, b-but... I hid... *Ghhft! Gaahh!* Anonymous... St-strongest... Th-that w... Was m-my... P-perfect... L... Life... Civit... Wh... What were... You...?”

Johndoe finally ran out of words.

“My master... Wh-what was this man speaking about...?”

It seemed that Seras hadn't understood it—what it was that had made Johndoe lose his composure.

But I know.

“Now he's dead, there's no sense wasting time trying to understand any more about him. For us...we're just lucky he didn't turn out to be on Civit's level.”

If he had been, with that awareness-blocking ability of his—we'd have lost.

“Right then.”

From the intel Johndoe just gave me, it sounds like the divine beast is already on its way to join up with the Ninth Order.

I looked around at the Sixth Order. Only a few were still awake, over half had

lost consciousness and had their eyes rolled back. The ones that remained though were absolutely terrified.

Like they can't believe that Johndoe was just defeated. Or maybe it's shock at how readily he abandoned them.

"Well, we're out of here... But I've gotta pay you guys back for the job you've done first..."

For Niko—the Band of the Shining Dragon.

For Liz—the Shanatilis Clan.

I can't have these people dying so quickly. That wouldn't sit right with me.

I poured mana in a sound sphere and finally sent a signal up—before long we were surrounded by monsters and dragonkin soldiers.

Slei was among them, who I'd left on standby as a messenger just in case. The monsters who came were from the western flank, who had been acting independently when Niko and her soldiers were attacked and mutilated. The rest were dragonkin soldiers who ran when the fighting started and managed to avoid the worst of it. After they escaped, they separately headed towards the central field, and we met them on the way.

I figured we'd group up with these guys sooner or later.

"Th-this is..." One of the dragonkin soldiers was speechless at what she beheld. The monsters looked a little disturbed by the spectacle as well. I scribbled off a quick note and handed it to one of the great wolves.

The note contained all the information I'd just gotten from Johndoe and details our next moves.

Aside from Slei, the great wolves are the fastest ones out here.

I proceeded to tell the wolf where to go—Piggymaru handled the interpreting.

"Squee-ee-ee! Squee—! Squ-que-que!"

The great wolf sped off, and I turned to the dragonkin soldiers around me.

"The Sixth Order of Alion—the ones who attacked you... This them?"

“Y-yes... B-but did you two truly defeat them alone?”

“Hard to believe?”

“To be honest...yes.”

“There were three of us.”

“Squ...” Piggymaru perked up, showing it was there too, but immediately grew a little sheepish, as if the little slime was worried if it had really contributed to the battle or not.

“You little dummy,” I said, reaching down to stroke Piggymaru. “You more than did your part today.”

“Sque?! Squee~. ♪”

“So, the stuff I asked for... Looks like you’ve brought it, eh?”

“Y-yes...”

One of the dragonkin soldiers lowered the backpack they were carrying.

Thnk!

I turned and stepped down hard on Ferenoch’s face.

“I had them bring me the thread you used on Niko and the others. And some gear to do some sewing of my own, too...”

“...!”

“Seems like you get where this is going, yeah?” I laughed. “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.”

Ferenoch writhed, looking almost like he was trying to squirm away from me.

“What...? You can dish it out, but you can’t take it? Never thought in your wildest dreams this’d ever happen to you?”

Seras watched in silence—the other monsters and dragonkin soldiers showed no signs of interrupting me.

“In the place where I was born, it’s real rare for criminals to get a punishment equal to their crimes. No matter how heinous the things they do, criminals are almost never made to taste the same pain of their victims. Personal revenge

and equal punishment wasn't allowed where I'm from. It's a place where those who take the law into their own hands as vigilantes are punished. But I'm a long way from home."

"Gh... Ghah... Gh-gh..."

"There's Johndoe's corpse, and I'll be merciful and kill a few more—then sew their parts to the rest of you. Arms, legs, everything."

Their poison's set to nonlethal mode—it won't let them die. Other factors will...eventually.

"If you're unlucky and you survive long enough, the maggots will come crawling. The flies will start to swarm."

I leaned forward and looked down on Ferenoeh from above.

"*My children* will take good care of you."

"Gh, nno... Sho-hp... Ki...ll m..."

"Nope. It's not going to be that easy."

I straightened my back and turned around.

"But unfortunately, I don't have the time to deal with you personally. That's why these people are here—they're the friends of those dragonkin you mutilated."

I've already talked to them about this—told them I'd give them the chance to get their revenge. But looking at them all now—I can't feel the intense hatred or desire for payback that was there at first. Something must have changed within them after seeing all this. Then there are the awful things that Niko and her soldiers had done to them... Right now they're facing down the reality of actually doing that to another person. Figures their resolve would falter a bit... Well, this wasn't unexpected.

I asked Seras to get on Slei's back, and turned to the dragonkin soldiers.

"What are you going to do?"

"...!"

"Get revenge on them, do the same things they did to your people? Or finish

them quick? I'm not the one that gets to decide that—it's up to you."

The dragonkin soldiers exchanged looks, and the monsters began to stir nervously as well. Before long, it seemed as if all knew what the others were thinking.

"W-we apologize... We are truly thankful for your thoughtfulness in preparing this for us. B-but to do such cruel things...we cannot.

"It's fine."

Figured as much. These people are kind... Kind and normal.

"I have to leave here right away, though. These Sixth Order knights are just going to get weaker and weaker, and my cursed magic won't wear off until they're basically finished. But I don't want to leave you all here with them if you aren't willing to kill these men. I can do that for you—"

"No." The dragonkin soldier before me tightened his grip on the sword in his hands. "I cannot do what they did, but neither can I forgive them for it. And we cannot ask you to do this—come, everyone!"

The dragonkin soldiers and monsters nodded in response, and they stepped forward to finish off the Sixth Order by their own hands. Seras stood watching, never averting her eyes from the scene.

Thunder roared solemnly above as heavy clouds gathered in the sky.

Perhaps there's rain coming.

"..."

I know I'm thinking about this all wrong. But in this world... I feel like there are some things you can't just gloss over, can't just forget about.

...But hey.

I slapped my temples with the palms of my hands.

At times like these, it makes me think...

"...I'm still just a kid."

"Eh?"

“Sorry. Just talking to myself.”

I saw the terror, the depths of despair in those Sixth Order knights’ eyes when I told them what I was about to do... Guess that’ll have to be enough for this time.

17:59—the Sixth Order of Knights were annihilated.

A light rain began to fall.

I rode Sleil with Seras sitting behind me in the saddle, both of us wearing our Leopard King outfits. Behind us were the dragonkin soldiers and monsters from earlier. A single stream of rainwater dripped down my mask...

The evening should have already been over, but the sun hung unusually long in the sky, giving me good visibility of the surrounding area.

“We’ve defeated the Sixth Order, the ones we were most concerned about facing... But there’re still others to contend with. The divine beast is still out there too... We should get a move on.”

I gave orders to the monsters and dragonkin behind us, and we left them behind as Sleil sped away.

Yasu’s on my mind as well... But there are too many other things I need to prioritize right now.

“Just a little further now,” said Seras, clinging to me from behind.

“Yeah—you tired?”

Seras gave me a wry smile. “Of the acting, yes.”

“Probably because you were doing it so well.”

“Do you like it...? When I smile like that?”

“I don’t *dislike* it. But if your smile was too perfect I figured it’d come off as unnatural. I like it best when you’re just smiling naturally I guess.”

“Y-you...” The arms she had wrapped around my waist squeezed tighter.
“Thank you.”

From the warmth in her voice, I could tell she was embarrassed, but she immediately pushed those emotions back down.

“Should we tell Lis that the Sixth Order have been defeated?”

“...Dunno. Maybe the attack on her village is something Lis wants to forget about. It’s something in the past. Let’s keep it quiet for a while longer.”

“Understood. I am of the same opinion.”

“Well... Everything I just did was for my own satisfaction anyway. I couldn’t stand to think of the ones who killed Lis’s people just living out there, carefree and easy.”

“I don’t believe that to be the case.”

“Hmm?”

“Nor was what happened just now self-satisfaction on my part either, of course.”

“I guess you’re right.”

We were really lucky to come across Johndoe and defeat him out there. When I think about men like him, people with amazing abilities roaming the battlefield...it makes my hair stand on end.

“Ahem...”

“What is it?”

“You...knew, didn’t you? That the Band of the Shining Dragon would not take revenge upon the Sixth Order in that way.”

The things I said to Ferenoch—I suppose Seras must’ve thought they were just a threat, nothing more.

“I wasn’t sure... If the dragonkin wanted to do to the Sixth Order what Ferenoch did to them, I might not have stopped it from happening. I expected they wouldn’t...but still.”

“As did I. Those who live in the Country at the End of the World are kind people, after all,” said Seras, before burying her face in my back.

If they’d chosen differently—would that have disappointed Seras? When they

made their choice... I felt a kind of relief, too.

After we'd ridden a little further, Seras spoke again. "This battle... Is it almost over, do you think?"

"Maybe. In any case, I can see the finish line."

Countless raindrops bounced off the stones below, as our great black blazing-eyed mount raced over the rocky ground.

Let's see... The remaining orders: The largest is the Seventh Order—and according to Johndoe they haven't made their move yet. The Ninth and Second haven't been seen either, and there are others beside them. Yasu Tomohiro and the divine beast—they're on my mind as well. Especially obtaining that divine beast by any means necessary. But the biggest sticking point in my head, whether I like it or not...

"The Wildly Beautiful Emperor..." I said the words aloud to myself and spurred Sleis on faster beneath us.

THE NINTH ORDER OF KNIGHTS

"**I** HAVE A RATHER unsettling feeling," said Nacht Jaeger, captain of the Ninth Order, wrinkling his nose.

"...Foul smell, this one."

Nacht was a handsome man with drooping eyes and a perpetual easy smile on his lips. His beige hair was tied up in a single knot behind his head, and there was a mole under his right eye. There was always a kind of light air about him. His main weapon was an oversized but other-wise typical pike.

"How should we proceed, Nacht?"

Standing beside him was his vice-captain, Snow Vanguard. Her skin was white like untouched snow, as was her hair. Only her eyes burned a fierce red. She looked like a rabbit but with none of the cuteness. Her expression was always indifferent and empty. It was said that no man alive had ever seen even the trace of a smile on her thin lips.

“No sign of that divine beast that Johndoe said would be coming. The reports suggest that the other orders are struggling to make progress out here. Perhaps we should pull back. Report this all to the Goddess.”

“Ha ha ha ha... Turned coward now, have you, Nacht?” someone said with a laugh.

It was not the vice-captain Snow who spoke but Branzol Stannion, the captain of the Fifth Order. His eyes hid beneath long locks of red hair that hung over his face. His beard connected to his sideburns, which were a reddish-bronze as well. His face was covered in cuts and burns from battle. “Branzol the Cremated” was a name well known to every mercenary on the continent.

Nacht closed one eye and gave a bitter laugh in response.

“Look... You don’t hafta hurry off and die here. There ain’t anything that’s worth your life by my reckoning.”

“Ha ha, sounds like you’re trying to put out the flames. Life burns out before you know it, so you’ve gotta burn the corpses of some worthy opponents. Mix their ash in with some wine and drink them all down. Everything just to keep the fire alive. Life, people, everything... Ha ha ha.”

“Spare me... There doesn’t need to be anything more to battle than the fight itself. Let’s get this over with and get back to our day.”

“Ha, you in the ninth are in unquestioned second place... Unrivaled but for the Sixth Order. What are you saying, captain?”

“I’m flattered you think so, but in terms of raw power the Second Order has us beat—their captain too surpasses me in strength, no?”

“Ha ha ha, interesting... There they are singing your praises, Nacht, and you’re singing them right back. How ’bout you settle who’s on top once and for all? Black and white. O-ohh?! Black and white! Mix those two, and you get ash gray! Ha ha! Wonder what the ash of a demi--human tastes like?! Be seein’ you!”

Nacht and Snow watched as the captain of the Fifth Order left them.

“There he goes. You sure we shouldn’t stop him, Nacht?”

“You know as well as I he would never listen.”

“I suppose so.”

Nacht wiped the smile from the corners of his mouth and looked up at the sky.

“Looks like rain.” He let out a short breath, then gave the order. “Withdraw.”

“Are you sure?”

“This battlefield—there’s an unpleasant smell about it. I can’t imagine the Sixth Order could ever fall with Johndoe at its helm...but this fishy stench is too strong. We’ll find somewhere else to be.”

“Should we tell the other orders?”

“I suppose so—a warning at least, just in case.”

“Understood.”

“But as I’m sure you’re aware, I don’t much mind if we’re the only order to survive this battle. To be frank, I don’t care at all what happens to the others. They’re twisted in ways I find hard to stomach.”

“We’re the minority in the Thirteen Orders.”

“The sensible ones die first in this world.”

“Oh? The captain who lays hands on his vice-captain gets to be considered one of the sensible ones now, eh?”

“*Ha ha...* Y-you’re tough. But listen, okay? I’m serious about this. I always am...”

“That’s enough for me. You’re taking responsibility after all.”

“Right, right... You’ve always been a real fearsome vice-captain, little Snow ... Huh!”

Nacht and Snow both jerked their heads in the same direction. They were currently located back towards the rear of the orders’ lines, the edge of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. The area was forested, with poor lines of sight, and the darkness and sounds of the rain had delayed them in noticing the enemy’s advance.

“Nacht.”

“Yeah?”

“They’re coming.”

A single bead of cold sweat dripped down Nacht’s cheek—but he was smiling now. “Man, what are we to do, eh? Johndoe was right, you’re here and he knew it.”

A bitter smile appeared on Nacht’s face—Snow was already signaling the others with her hands, and the Ninth Order prepared for battle.

“You’ve been in the shadow of the sixth, but I’ve heard tales of your Ninth Order all the same. It appears the seventh—the largest of your number—have yet to take the field. I should be most wary of the sixth. But crushing you here will give me quite the advantage in the battles to come,” the newcomer said.

“Greetings to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.”

The Mira soldiers formed lines—from what Nacht could see, his army still had superiority in numbers.

“These aren’t enemies we can just overwhelm by force alone—especially not the Wildly Beautiful Emperor,” he said to Snow.

“That sword at his waist... It’s pair to Stormcaliber, demonic sword of the captain of the White Wolf Riders, Sogude Sigmus. That is the divine sword, Exbringer...”

The emperor had yet to draw his sword.

“He’s underestimating us. But given the rumors about him, that’s hardly a surprise.”

Still...he is a handsome devil.

He had a unique kind of complexion, the kind that typically only lived in the transition from boy to young adult.

I suppose his slight frame also helps preserve his youth.

He had porcelain skin, even whiter and more dazzling than Snow’s. His jaw was thin, and his eyes were such a deep blue Nacht felt he might never see the bottom.

His almond-shaped eyes had a mystical quality—and they were sharp. His lips looked so smooth they could have been sculpted from stone, and each single strand of his fine hair shone as if it had been fashioned from gold itself. It hung in bunches on either side of his head, reaching all the way down to his waist.

His posture was impeccable, graceful to all eyes. His armor was elegant and refined, with notes of white and an imperious air. Everything was perfectly in harmony. There was a calm, solemn authority about his appearance.

Still, Nacht had doubts about the Emperor of Mira. He was only twenty years old, according to the reports, which sounded almost admiring when spoken aloud.

Can he really pull it off? Inhabiting such a character, and at such a young age?

His voice sounded elegant and clear as it caressed Nacht's ears, like the melodic chime of bells. There was a spoonful of dubious leniency mixed in there too.

Charm... A bewitching kind of charisma. Yes, as if he's trying to attract his enemies, not defeat them, thought Nacht, a little afraid. Seductive and mysterious with a beauty that transcends gender, a unique streak of devilry that could have led me to accept him as a woman.

"Makes me feel bad to think there's such a gulf between us, as men."

"Quite."

"Hey... That's where you're supposed to deny it, little Snow."

"Sorry. He's way too beautiful in the flesh."

"I guess the only one that could compete would be... Seras Ashrain, maybe? I saw her in person too once. If I hadn't, I think the Wildly Beautiful Emperor would've stopped my heart on the spot just now."

"I can't even tell if you're joking. But even at this distance, he's awfully easy on the eyes."

"But like, our lives are in danger, right? We can't spend too long staring at the guy."

"Eh? I can still kill him. It's a shame, but I can do it."

“So you didn’t even think about capturing him? Little Snow, you really are terrifying. But...” Nacht drew his pike and readied himself atop his horse. “This isn’t an enemy we can afford to take chances with, is he? Can’t be taken in by his beauty... I hear he’s the best swordsman in Mira.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor craned his slender neck a little to the side and placed a hand to the hilt of his sword.

“You. You wish to fight me?”

“Interested, yeah. I’m pretty confident in my own abilities. I want to see just how strong the famous Wildly Beautiful Emperor really is... Hmm?!”

“Nacht.”

“Yeah. But who are they? That group is giving off the most unbelievable stench...”

“Right, then, finally time for Asagi-chan and her friends to take the stage, huh~?”

It was a young girl—she looked to be about the same age as the emperor. There were other young girls with her. They were nothing like the rest of the Miran soldiers surrounding them.

“Hey, hey, Asagi... Like, those guys over there look su-per strong...”

“*Wah ha ha*... I’m sure Zine-sama and the rest’ll cover for us, it’s A-okay! We can do this! We can!”

“Y-you’re getting weirdly into this today, Asagi.”

“Ehh?! You’re s’posed to mime smoking and be like ‘*It’s almost as if your soul is screaming out for help...*’ or something! *Huh huh huh...*”

“Ummm? ’Kay. A-anyway... We’re really gonna be counting on Zine-sama, okay?! Ah, Zine-sama...”

“Me~ow! Are all my girls head over heels for that guy or what?!”

“St-stop it Asagi! Y-you’re talking about that *now*?!”

“*Omigod*, I mean, look how embarrassed you’re getting!”

“A-Asagi-san... S-seriously, we...”

“Oh, Pidgey-chan! *Myah ha*, you’re such a scaredy-cat, meow! But now you’re such a capable kid that I barely recognize you!”

Beside the one they were calling Asagi stood an adorable young girl with a large chest. Asagi turned and put an arm around her shoulder.

“C’mon, Kobato-chan, do it for me? Your new unique skill’s super boring, but I need it right now. You’re super, super important to Asagi’s group right now, Kashima Kobato-chan!”

“S-sure... I’ll try my best.”

“Hey hey, don’t give up now. You lot neither, ’kay?!” Asagi called out to the girls around her. “Like I’m always telling you, this is so we can go home to our old world! Not that I mind this digital detox! But there’s all kinds of stuff you can’t get over here, I see that now! I’m starting to miss that old world of ours! C’mon... Travel’s super fun and all, but it’s only ’cause you get to go back home and realize that’s where you feel best, yeah?”

“Th-that’s right...”

“We’re all still so young, there’re all kinds of things left for us to do in the old world. I wanna go back!”

“Y-yeah! I, like, totally agree with that!”

“Then let’s get this done♪! I mean...we made it through that terrible battle in Yonato, didn’t we?”

There was a darkness in Asagi’s eyes—her mouth was smiling, but that was all.

“We saw people die, and totally messed up corpses... We practiced seeing all kinds of things, so like, it was lucky in a way.” Asagi placed an index finger to her lips. “But hey... All we’ve done is make corpses haven’t we? And back then we were fighting *monsters*.”

The other girls stiffened up and swallowed—Asagi did a quick turnaround and was suddenly bright and cheerful again.

“S-soz, soz! I just like, got a bit serious there didn’t I? Serious ain’t *in* right now! So, well, anyway...”

She's looking this way.

Despite facing down the entire Ninth Order, Asagi almost looked fearless.

That expression... Like a beast hunting her prey.

"Let's give it our best, shall we?" she said. "Let's practice killing some *people*."

Chapter 3:

The Heroes in the Depths of the Demon King Essence

SOGOU AYAKA and the two Takao Sisters ran through the hallways of their dormitory in the Alion Capital of Eno.

“But is this really the work of the Demon King?”

With the sudden fog of thick Demon King Essence that had descended upon them, Ayaka and the sisters expected this to be a Demon Empire surprise attack.

“In any case, the only ones in the castle who can move in this intense essence are the heroes from another world! Us! It matters not who’s causing it, only that we strike out against the source of this essence,” answered Takao Hijiri, running on ahead.

At times like these, seeing Hijiri-san so calm and collected puts my mind at ease...

They were heading for the training grounds outside. Ayaka’s group had been practicing out there lately and were scheduled to be there from morning ’til evening.

First we need to join up with them and make sure -everyone’s safe! The other heroes might be in danger if they stumble upon the source before we can get to them!

They were stronger than they used to be—but Ayaka knew that against the Demon King himself, they would need S-class heroes.

“Hey, class rep, do you know where Kirihara is?!”

“I’m sorry, Itsuki-san. I-I don’t...!”

Kirihara Takuto had been acting alone for some time, and only showed his face in front of the others when the Goddess called all the heroes together for a meeting.

“But unless we have his strength to help us now...”

There’s no time for grumbling. If this is really the Demon King out there...

“We need all three of us S-class heroes to work together!”

“I-I’m here too, y’know, class rep!” said Itsuki.

“I didn’t mean to slight you Itsuki-san, it’s j—”

“Don’t worry about that! I know, okay! Man, you’re cute when you get flustered, ain’tcha class rep?”

“I-Itsuki-san!”

“You two. Up ahead.”

“I”

Before them stood two golden-eyed monsters.

The creatures’ upper bodies were gnarled hunks of muscle, and their heads looked like crescent moons, with golden eyes bulging on either side. Their mouths looked like hollowed out caverns devoid of any tongues or teeth, but along the sides of their arms were dotted countless pairs of human lips, with several long snake-like tongues writhing out from each of them. The two monsters had just made it to the top of the stairs at the end of the hall and were now frozen in place, looking directly at Ayaka and the Takao Sisters.

“Hooohh—! Horrrhoooh—!”

“Aneki, want me to deal with it?”

“Yes. If you w—”

“You two, keep running! Don’t stop! Blade Set!” shouted Ayaka.

Slash—!

Ayaka used the mana-infused blade affixed to the head of her spear to open one of the monsters from stomach to shoulder. Then leaping over the two of them, twisting her body through the air, she attacked again. A second slash cleaved the creature’s back, and it flopped apart, severed completely in two. As she turned away, she planted an Inner Bomb in the other monster’s head. It exploded, sending blood and bone fragments bursting like fireworks. The two

monster corpses sank to the floor, and Ayaka ran on down the hallway behind the Takao Sisters, who had already gone on ahead.

Takao Itsuki looked back at Ayaka.

“S-seriously...?”

“She’s not the girl we once knew. To be frank, I find it reassuring.”

As Ayaka caught up with them both, Hijiri stopped in front of an open window at the end of the hall. Ayaka and Itsuki followed her lead and stopped in their tracks.

“We’ll jump down here—this is the fastest route to the training grounds.”

“Eh?” cried Ayaka.

“F-from all the way up here...? Are our stat modifiers going to be enough to cushion our fall?”

“Wind.” Hijiri activated her unique skill, and Itsuki moved as well.

“You don’t need to worry about that, rep—hup you go!” Itsuki swept Ayaka lightly up into her arms, embracing her like a princess.

“Wah?! Wai-! Itsuki-sa-?!”

“Let’s go.” Hijiri jumped without a moment’s hesitation, and Itsuki followed with Ayaka in her arms.

Ayaka couldn’t help but cling to Itsuki. In retrospect, she needn’t have worried, with her stat modifiers being what they were. Still, she felt a uniquely uneasy sensation of floating mixed with falling. As the ground drew near, it was as if there were some invisible cushion slowing their fall in the most peculiar way. They landed safely, and once Ayaka was back on her own feet the three of them sped off immediately.



“Hijiri-san, was that...”

“One aspect of my unique skill is manipulating the wind, yes.”

“And Itsuki-san, the way you lifted me up so effortlessly?”

“That too,” answered Hijiri.

“Hey, class rep... You’re super strong, but your body’s pretty soft, huh? Like there and there... Real squishy-like.”

“I-Itsuki-san!”

Hijiri noticed something, a human-sized golden-eyed monster. In its hands it held two human heads, dangling them by their hair like trophies of war.

“It’s killing people in the castle who can’t even move to escape. Nobody but us heroes can resist right now.”

A condensed rage bubbled up inside of Ayaka.

She launched her spear at incredible speed, and it pierced the monster’s skull, destroying it entirely. Her blow was so strong that the creature’s head just seemed to have disappeared. As they passed it by, she wrenched her spear from the opposing wall and looked down at the two human heads the monster had been holding. A pang of remorse ran through her, and she kept going.

“Class rep, you’re amazin’!”

“Hijiri-san!” Ayaka called out to her. “We have to deal with the monsters as well as the Demon King. Otherwise, they’ll kill everyone who can’t defend themselves!”

“You’re right.” Hijiri thought for a moment. “We should consider whether these monsters came in with the Demon King or whether he’s “spawning” them here. If it’s the former, then...”

Ayaka understood her meaning and swallowed.

“If the Demon King is spawning monsters...”

“Yes. The monsters won’t stop coming until we defeat the source itself.”

“Then how about we split up?!” suggested Itsuki. “One group goes to kill the

Demon King or whatever's causin' this, and one takes out the monsters around here!"

"It's too early to make that call. With the Demon King's strength still unknown, I don't wish to divide our forces yet."

Hijiri gave Ayaka a glance, and she bit her lip in response.

She's right. But knowing the people of Alion are being slaughtered nearby and doing nothing to stop it... I know she's right, but...

"Sogou-san, I know this troubles you."

"I'm sorry. I-I..."

"I have no right to attempt to twist your ethical considerations. You have the strength of an S-class after all. In this battle, I am the one who needs your help, not the other way around. And you are the only one who can decide what actions you take next, Sogou-san."

"Hijiri-san..."

"Do what you must, and I shall do the same." Takao Hijiri's tone was neither blunt nor mean. She spoke flatly, but there was just a hint of kindness in her voice. "But if I could make just one suggestion..."

The training grounds came into view.

"I believe we should hunt down the Demon King together and attack him."

Ayaka saw Nihei Yukitaka leaving the grounds. He looked to be calling to some others who were still inside. Next came Murota Erii, then Suou Kayako not long after. When Minamino Moe saw Ayaka coming towards them, her face lit up, and Nihei started waving.

"Class rep! Look, the Takao Sisters are here too! C'mon, didn' I tell ya?! They're here to save us, like I said!"

"Ah, man, I love you, class rep, I really do!"

"...What a relief."

"Ayaka-chan! You're okay! I-I'm so glad to s-see you... *Sob...*"

The other heroes began to gather around them. It was Hijiri who spoke first.

“Itsuki and the other heroes here will rescue those in the castle. What do you think of that, Sogou-san?”

Ayaka bit her lip—she felt as if she was about to cry. Hijiri was speaking casually about the matter, but she knew exactly how Ayaka felt and she empathized.

“Hijiri-san...”

“Let the S-Classes go and fight the Demon King. I’m not sure how strong he is, but with your strength we might be able to beat him. That’s just how powerful you appear to me right now.”

“...Okay.” Ayaka tightened the grip on her spear. “Thank you, Hijiri-san.”

“It’s too early for that. I’m no saint like you. I’m a cunning woman, you know.”

“*Heh heh*, that’s a sly way of putting it, Hijiri-san. I might start liking you even more.”

Hijiri looked away from her.

“You’re a really good person too, Hijiri-san.”

Ayaka and Hijiri put their plan into motion. The heroes were split into the Suou group, Nihei group, and Murota group—with Suou Kayako serving as general leader of all three. Takao Itsuki was to move freely about, helping to defeat monsters that looked too tough for the others.

Hijiri continued to quickly fire off orders to the group.

“If an enemy appears that looks like the Demon King—you’re to withdraw immediately and use these.”

“What are they?”

“Magical devices known as sound spheres. I’ve actually been collecting them for some time now. They’re precious items... But I managed to obtain some from one of the capital’s alleyway markets. Others came to me through connections.”

She explained she had learned about their existence in the closed stacks of

the library and that sound spheres were magical devices that emitted sound when a certain amount of mana was poured into them.

We can't use smartphones in this world, but with this we can instantly signal to each other over long distances. But...connections? With who?

Doubt lingered in Ayaka's mind as Hijiri continued her explanation.

"The sounds are different depending on their color, so we'll be able to understand our other groups' situations if we decide what each signal stands for ahead of time. Which signal means you want others to come and help you when you're in a tight spot—that kind of thing. The sound is loud enough to reach almost anywhere in the castle, so we should know your rough location."

"So... We can pick a color for if we bump into that Demon King guy, and that'll make you come running even if you're super far away, right Aneki?"

"These sound spheres can convey more information than horns and take less time than smoke signals. We could also signal to each other with flags, but there are times we might lose line of sight. Unless there's some great storm with thunder, these spheres are our best option."

The group determined their different signals based on the various colors and sounds of the spheres.

"Right, then, best luck in the battle."

"Ahem, Hijiri-san... Y-you be careful too!"

"Thank you, Minamino-san."

Moe was dumbfounded. "D-d-did Hijiri-san just smile?"

"Be careful, everyone... And please, save those people who remain in the castle," Ayaka called out to the group before she left.

"Hey, we're gonna do the best we can, 'kay?" Itsuki folded her arms behind her head and snorted confidently at her. "You keep it together too, class rep."

"I will do my utmost."

"Aneki... I figure you're gonna be fine, but be careful out there just in case, yeah?"

“You too, Itsuki. I leave these heroes in your care.”

“If that’s how it’s gonna be... Then leave it to me, aneki—I’ll do my best out there too!”

“Well then, let’s go Sogou-san.”

“Okay. We’re going to make it through this everyone! I’ll see you on the other side!”

Ayaka and Hijiri set off running across the castle grounds once more. When Ayaka turned her head, Kayako and the other heroes were no longer in view.

“Let’s believe in them—in their strength. And they have Itsuki with them.”

“Y-yes...”

Please... Stay safe out there, everyone.

Hijiri suddenly stopped and peered up at a lookout tower built into part of the castle’s wall.

“That tower would give us a broad unimpeded view of the surrounding area.”

“Yes, it might be faster than running around and searching on foot.”

“We can use my unique skill to get down from there in a hurry as well.”

They rushed up the tower stairs leading to the top, and found writhing soldiers inside, struggling against the influence of the Demon King Essence. Ayaka had no choice but to quell the pangs of sympathy she felt and kept running until they made it to the top floor.

The sight lines over the castle are quite good from up here.

The two of them took care to hide themselves from view as they peeked out of a window. Ayaka stifled a surprised gasp.

“Hijiri-san, over there.”

“Yes.”

There was a black fog, about the size of a person, swaying as it “walked” about. It was near the fountain in the castle square, about 300 meters from the watchtower.

Suddenly the black fog swelled—and now they could see it clearly. The huge mouth—those white teeth and gums. Looking closer, Ayaka could make out golden--colored spheres in the creature's mouth, little dots of light like eyes lurking in there, but the black fog creature quickly sucked them back into the inner recesses. It was a strange thing to look at, as if the only thing lurking in that black fog was the false human mouth.

Then... It spewed monsters.

They came tumbling like fresh fish caught from a deep-sea net, a torrent of golden-eyed monsters pouring out of the Demon King—spewing, spawning, birthing.

“From what you told me... The only one the Demon King shared his power of spawning golden-eyed monsters with was the First of the Sworn, the strongest of his Inner Circle, no?”

“Y-yes... From what the First of the Sworn told me, it's a special ability that the Demon King would never share lightly. That he never usually would...”

“And that black fog down there... I think it's the same as the thing that showed up on the eastern front—the core of that great living fortress.”

“Then you mean—that's...” Ayaka stopped short of saying it aloud and swallowed.

When the creature was done spewing monsters, the black fog withered.

Hijiri lightly folded her arms as she stared down at it.

“Yes,” she said determinedly. “That settles it.”

Ayaka and Hijiri rushed down the stairs of the watchtower. They had originally planned on jumping down, but Hijiri judged the risk that the Demon King might notice them was too great. They left the tower and came to a large passageway with an arch overhead. The door to the passage was wide open, and on the other side...

Ayaka kept her back to the wall and gingerly looked in.

There he is.

He moved like a ghost, swaying as he went—five golden-eyed monsters surrounded him...

Now that we're in close, I can see. I think he has feet on the ground that he's using to walk. There's a humanoid body somewhere within that fog...

That's good news. If he has flesh, I can cut through it.

Ayaka exchanged a glance with Hijiri.

"How do you suppose we should attack, Hijiri-san...?"

"A surprise attack using the most powerful unique skills at our disposal. I believe that will be best." Hijiri stopped herself from saying anything more. She looked deep in thought.

"I agree. This is an enemy we must defeat sooner or later. And if we manage to beat him here, we can all go home at last."

"...Yes. Yes, you're right."

Ayaka could sense a kind of hesitancy from her. "Is something on your mind?"

"If the Demon King dies here, then... Well, it's true it would be a big event. And if it means we would never have to face that living fortress on the battlefield, this could be a great opportunity for us. A surprise attack at the best possible timing... Let's do it, Sogou-san."

"All right, then, Hijiri-san." Ayaka drew her features in even tighter and gripped her spear.

"We can do this. I know it," said Hijiri, turning to face her.

"Yes. Let's trust in each other, in our strength."

"So, Hijiri-san... Those golden-eyed monsters around him—which do you think—!"

Ayaka almost screamed out loud. Hijiri just placed a hand to her own mouth and looked reflectively down on the scene unfolding before her.

"...I wonder what's going to happen next."

“I’ve ended up here, in the end—facing you.”

“...”

The Demon King turned slowly on the spot to face *him*.

“So, the thing I saw on the eastern front was just some big car you were riding in, huh? This is the real you...the core? Man... It all comes down to you, huh? Couldn’t be any other way.”

Panting as if letting off heat, he brushed his hair aside and raised his head to glare insolently at the black fog creature.

“Here at the end, no matter what... You face me. You struggle and squirm, but here you are. They say God doesn’t play dice—but I don’t even know how to play in the first place. Soon as weaklings get addicted to gambling, it’s over for them... Can’t help feeling God’s no match for me anymore.”

Kirihara Takuto was cloaked in small golden dragons. He stood facing the Demon King, northeast of Ayaka and Hijiri.

“In the past world, it was just the same. The strong are presented with opportunities worthy of their abilities. All the best money-making schemes land in the hands of the strong, see. In this world, the winners just keep on winning. Oh, you need a self-introduction? I’m one of the winners.”

The Demon King was completely silent. Its mouth resembled that of a human’s, but no words ever left its lips. Ayaka remembered how the Inner Circle demons had interacted with humans.

Did they develop the ability to speak because the Demon King himself couldn’t?

Ayaka was strangely unsettled by the situation—unable to communicate, incapable of understanding or being understood by the thing before her.

The Demon King’s fog floated lightly about—the five golden-eyed monsters surrounding him looked ready for battle but showed no signs of moving just yet.

“Tch. Gotta hurry, I suppose. Time to tie up all my loose ends...”

Hijiri narrowed her eyes.

“I believe he has noticed our presence. In addition, with the way Kirihara’s eyes just shifted—it’s possible the Demon King knows we are here as well.”

“Th-then let’s go, Hijiri-san. In our current position, we can catch him in a kind of pincer attack. If we move in sync with Kirihara-kun, then...”

“No. That won’t work.”

“Hijiri-san?!”

“You’re flustered, so I’m sure you haven’t noticed it yet...or perhaps it’s something you simply don’t want to believe is true.”

“Eh?”

“Look at him. Closely.”

“Kirihara-kun? What is he...? Ah—!”

The realization shocked Ayaka. Hijiri glanced at her, then turned her eyes straight back to Kirihara.

“He’s aiming at us too.”

She’s right. Kirihara’s left arm is pointed in our direction...as if he thinks we’re here to steal his prey. Even now—he doesn’t see us as allies, but...

“He thinks of us as enemy combatants.”

“I-it can’t be...” Ayaka bit her lip hard.

“If we try to attack the Demon King, I don’t think he’ll hesitate to use his unique skill against us.”

Just when all three of us should be working together...

Kirihara’s other arm, of course, was pointed directly at the Demon King.

“...”

Just then, a shadowy scythe-like shape stretched out from the black fog. It looked to Ayaka like the arm of some black praying mantis. The pressure the Demon King gave off grew stronger, spiked suddenly and intensely, and hit

Ayaka like a wave as if it were piercing her skin.

Einglanz was nothing compared to this! Such pressure... So this is the Demon King...

“It seems the time has come for me to demonstrate my abilities, hasn’t it? So...let the final battle begin. It’s time.”

The dragons swirling about Kiri-hara gleamed even brighter than before, and swam ever faster through the air.

“...for Kiri-hara.”

“Dragonic Buster.”

The Demon King brought down his protruding scythe.

It sounded like an explosion—the mighty downward swing split Kiri-hara’s Dragic Buster cleanly in two. Two waves of energy split to the left and right, haphazardly screeching past the Demon King and crashing into the castle walls behind him, reducing them to dust.

Craaaa-sh!

Crumble, Crumble...

Rock dust filled the air.

He blocked K-Kiri-hara’s unique skill...

It was the first time Ayaka had ever seen that happen. Worse: all five of the golden-eyed monsters which had taken cover behind the Demon King had survived the attack.

Did he slice through Kiri-hara’s attack, precisely so it wouldn’t hit those monsters?

The monsters looked hesitant, taking a few steps back.

...To anyone except the Demon King, that unique skill of Kiri-hara’s must look terrifying.

“Living up to your name, eh...? Worthy of the title.”

The Demon King still stood there in place, turned towards Kiri-hara...

“ ... ”

...Still in complete silence.

“So that Demon King name of yours ain’t just for show, that’s what you’re getting at? There’s a little Kiri-hara in you too, huh...?” Kiri-hara remained aloof, showing no signs of concern that his overwhelmingly powerful -offensive unique skill had been blocked.

“Regular small-fry losers would probably start panicking right about now. But I’m different when I get in trouble. My unique skill isn’t all I got, see...? Sorry in advance, but I don’t see any way I could lose this fight. I can’t even picture it. Winning’s just the way it’s gotta be. No matter how you struggle... I’m not like those other heroes who rely completely on their unique skills, I...”

Kiri-hara drew his katana. “I was born different. A different vessel... Dragonic Buster!”

His attack this time looked different, the dragons in that golden wave writhed and rose faster than his first...but the Demon King cut it down, just as he had the first.

In that instant, Ayaka saw Kiri-hara closing in on the Demon King, katana in mid-swing. He had hidden inside the wave of his attack, following along close behind it.

He used his Dragonic Buster to hide himself...! That attack just now was a feint, just to block the enemy’s line of sight.

Several of the golden dragons swimming around Kiri-hara swelled up and attacked the nearby monsters. Kiri-hara himself paid them no attention and swung his katana, bathed in a shimmering golden-aura, directly at the Demon King.

Ayaka was about to ask Hijiri if they should support him when she noticed Hijiri was biting her bottom lip.

That expression—it’s like she knows there’s something wrong. But what is it? What’s the matter here?

Ayaka felt the doubts welling up inside her but pushed them down.

There's no time for that. We should focus on defeating the Demon King now, while he's still right here in front of us.

Suddenly a change shot across Hijiri's face. Ayaka followed her eyes to see what she was looking at...

Kirihara Takuto had been beaten back.

Ayaka saw a huge black lump of flesh had emerged from within the black fog: a great gnarled fist that had just punched Kirihara away. The fist seemed to have appeared in an instant—there was no way the fog could have concealed a thing of that size.

Whatever's inside must have released the attack in a split-second. The fog spread when it was spawning those monsters as well... It must be able to manipulate its size. The Demon King can expand and contract its "core" in there.

That attack looked tricky to deal with. There was no indication that it was going to strike. When the enemy doesn't telegraph anything, it makes it so hard to read when an attack is coming.

"K-Kirihara-kun!"

He was gone, knocked back completely out of sight.

Ayaka heard the sound of castle walls crumbling as he hit them with the speed of a cannonball. Then a rumble like thunder echoed across the grounds. She saw dust rising in the distance from where he'd landed. It seemed as if he'd gone through several walls before stopping.

Just how far away did that attack send him? Is he still...alive?

Hijiri placed a hand on Ayaka's shoulder.

"Let's believe that he's okay. I'm sure I saw him defend himself before the attack came, just a moment before the Demon King struck."

Ayaka hadn't seen anything of the sort.

Hijiri's words were vague... *Too vague.*

"Sogou-san... We don't have any time to check up on him right now. Next..."

The Demon King floated about to face them.

“...It’s our turn.”

Hijiri poured mana into one of her sound spheres, and the ball in her hands began to ring. The signal let everyone know: *“Located Demon King, do not approach the area.”* It would keep Kayako, Itsuki, and the others from getting too close.

Ayaka had intended on using her sound sphere in tandem with their surprise attack, had it been possible. But with the idea of a surprise attack off the table, Hijiri had no qualms with making loud noises any longer.

The lump of flesh that had blown Kirihara across the castle grounds had disappeared back into the fog. The Demon King stretched out its black scythe, motioning in their direction, and the five golden-eyed monsters that had escaped Kirihara’s dragons’ attacks readied themselves for battle once more.

The monsters charged in unison.

Hijiri’s right... There’s no time for us to check on Kirihara now!

“Thanks to Kirihara-kun’s attack, we’ve learned one of the Demon King’s trump cards... And now we know a little information on how fast he’s able to move.”

“Well... Yes. You’re right.”

“Those monsters charging at us are probably feelers, just to see how we move... Disposable pawns to test our abilities. Sogou-san, can you conserve your power as you fight?”

“I... I believe I can.”

She means I shouldn’t give it my all just yet.

“Then let’s go.”

“Y-yes.”

Hijiri charged first and the monsters were closing in. Ayaka took three—Hijiri two.

It was over in an instant—golden-eyed monsters were no longer even a threat

to them.

Thirty percent of my strength was more than enough.

“I expected nothing less, Sogou-san. Nice work.”

“You too, Hijiri-san.”

“If the Demon King’s core is within that fog, we should determine whether physical attacks will be effective against it.”

“Okay then.”

“Let’s go in from either side, pen him in. Come on... Wind.”

The moment Hijiri finished speaking the name of her skill, she raced away with incredible speed.

Is that an aspect of her unique skill? The electric element can be used to speed her up, similar to the way her younger sister’s skill works.

Ayaka moved too.

I’ve only just gotten over my injuries, and I can feel the creaking under the pressure...

Kyokugen—Top Speed.

Several more black scythed tentacles emerged from the Demon King’s fog.

It’s still capable of making more then... Here they come!

“Silver World!”

A huge silver sphere appeared above Ayaka’s head. The Demon King inclined his mouth, as if looking up at it. The sphere quickly began to warp into the shapes of various weapons, and Ayaka snatched a single unique sword from their number.

In her right hand, she gripped her spear—in her left, the sword.

The weakness of using these unique weapons was that none of her attack skills would work in tandem with them. But as long as she carried her regular spear, that wouldn’t be an issue.

This spear’s still a fine weapon in its own right.

Several of the tentacle scythes came for Ayaka. She watched each of their movements, tracking their paths as they darted through the air. In an instant she was showered with sparks from the impact. All the scythes had been parried, not by the weapons in her hands—but by those floating in the air around her.

Since her defeat of Zweigseed, Ayaka's unique skill had evolved. Now she was capable of moving all of her unique weapons that were within range. Now she was capable of fighting like a many-armed Hecatoncheires of myth.

An unending shower of sparks surrounded her, flickering as their weapons clashed faster and faster.

Ayaka noticed an opening—some of the tentacle scythes subtly trying to guide her—indicating a weak spot. She ordered her unique weapons with her and lunged—but that was exactly what the Demon King had wanted. It sent out its fleshy fist—shooting towards her like a pile bunker.

He showed me an opening on purpose, and I was -deceived. He baited me... invited me in.

Ayaka had thought she was choosing her own path by attacking—but in reality it had been chosen for her.

The Demon King swung to crush her.

"I knew you would."

She dodged the speeding fist and slashed at it with her unique sword.

That feeling. And blood.

Red blood.

My attack... It got through.

Guarding against incoming tentacle scythes with her floating weapons, Ayaka launched a series of slashing attacks at the Demon King, aiming towards the core. All his tentacles turned to defend—even the ones that had been sent out after Hijiri.

But now he's on the defense, there's no way I'm finding a way through... It makes me more vulnerable to openings as well!

Ayaka sensed her disadvantage and leaped back. She heard the sound of her feet landing in the dirt. Hijiri jumped back too and positioned herself by Ayaka's side.

"Sogou-san, you..."

"Eh?"

"The Demon King's attacks... You can see them all coming? That lump of flesh came for you, too. I thought you'd run, but you kept fighting."

"Eh? Yes... Somehow, I did. ...Hijiri-san?"

Ayaka had been glancing from time to time out of the corner of her eye during the fight—it looked as if Hijiri was keeping up with the Demon King as well.

"I'm barely holding on. I tried to use my Blizzard Wind to quickly create an ice weapon similar to yours, but it wasn't strong enough. It uses up a lot of MP too, so this battle is going to get more difficult for me the longer it continues."

Ayaka had noticed that the ice weapon in Hijiri's hands had shattered when she parried one of the tentacle scythes.

"My skills consume less mana now that they've leveled up... I think I can keep fighting."

The Demon King was motionless, the lump of flesh still jutting out from the black fog. It appeared as if it was staring at the wound, but the damage seemed superficial.

That lump of flesh doesn't look like part of his core.

"I was completely on the defensive, with no room for any other maneuvers. Not a moment to spare for attacking as you did, Sogou-san. Nor even any time to check on your condition during the battle."

The two of them stood ready to jump back into battle, staring at the Demon King.

"...He isn't moving."

"You're right. I wonder what he's thinking... Or perhaps he's waiting to see

how this plays out? Sogou-san... Can you maintain that *kyokugen* ability of yours much longer?”

“Eh? Yes. The burden on my body isn’t as bad as it was before. Perhaps it’s because of my extra stat modifiers after defeating that Inner Circle demon. Or maybe I’m just getting used to it.”

Hijiri sighed, defeated, and for a moment let slip an exasperated smile.

“Innate talent, I suppose,” said Hijiri, never taking her eyes off the Demon King.

She’s always thinking about something.

“Sogou-san, I realize this is an incredibly dangerous thing to ask you to do...”

“Y-yes?”

“Could you buy me some time? Alone, I mean.”

“Eh? Me, alone...?”

She looked at the Demon King once more.

“If the Demon King’s combat strength remains at its current level...then y-yes, I believe I can give you some time. Ahem—Status Open.” She checked her remaining MP. There was a reserve amount she wasn’t willing to go beyond, but factoring that in... “At best I can buy you roughly an hour.”

Hijiri sighed.

“More than I imagined... You’re special, Sogou-san, really.”

“I-I’m really not that sp—ah, I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t be overly modest.”

Hijiri smiled again, as if dredging up emotions from days gone by.

She’s smiling a lot today.

“If you need my assistance, use the sound spheres to signal to me. Here are some more messages we can use.”

Hijiri went on to explain quickly a few extra signals for the sound spheres.

“Hijiri-san... Where will you go?”

“There’s something I must check on.”

I wonder what that could be?

“There’s a reason I’m not telling you what it is... Oh, and here.” Hijiri placed a folded piece of paper into Ayaka’s pouch.

“What is it?”

“No need to read it now. Read it if I don’t come back, and burn it after you’re done, okay?”

Wait...

“If you don’t come back? What do you mean...?”

“Just in case, that’s all. Don’t worry about it, I do plan on returning. I just always tend to plan for the worst. You know that, don’t you?”

“Y-yes...”

Neither of them ever took their eyes off the Demon King. He began to draw his great lump of flesh back into the fog but showed no signs of advancing.

“I don’t know how much responsibility I will be able to take—but I will accept as much as I can.”

Responsibility for what?

Hijiri turned away. “Right, then, I leave him to you.”

“Ah, H-Hijiri-san!”

She stopped and looked back.

“It’s okay. You can ask me anything.”

“If, ehm... If I think I can defeat him...should I do it?”

Hijiri’s eyes were wide with shock—a look that Ayaka had truly never seen on her face before.

“*Heh.*” Hijiri laughed, in spite of herself. “You really are special—you know that?”

I’ve never seen her do that either—laugh so naturally...

“I-I’m sorry, Hijiri-san.”

“It’s fine. Right... I suppose I’ll need to give you this as well then.” Hijiri handed something to Ayaka.

“Ah—!”

It was the black crystal collar that the Goddess had entrusted to Hijiri. They had been told that a special kind of Demon King Essence lived within the Demon King’s heart—essence that would be necessary to send the heroes back to their old world. The Goddess had explained that once the Demon King was defeated in battle and his heart was completely destroyed, the necklace would absorb and collect the Demon King Essence he would emit in death.

“Once the core of the Root of all Evil is defeated, perhaps his Demon King Essence will be converted into some kind of powerful energy? I believe only that energy will remain behind, harmless—but still there,” Hijiri explained, before giving Ayaka another faint smile. “I entrust this to you, Sogou-san.”

“O-okay... I understand.”

“Once the Demon King is defeated, his essence will be neutralized, and the effect he’s having on this castle should fade as well. I might be able to tell you’ve defeated him by the effect his death has on the environment. But please, call me with the sound sphere just in case. Also...” Hijiri looked off into the distance, the direction Kirihara had been sent flying. “If Kirihara-kun is passed out right now, he may try to interfere once he awakes. He may attempt to ‘take your kill.’ You must ensure that *you’re* the one that deals the finishing blow. *Promise* me. *You* need to be the one to finish this. No. Matter. What.”

“O-okay! I will... I’ll deal the finishing blow!”

Hijiri paused. “Sogou-san.”

“Y-yes...?”

“I’m truly glad I was summoned here with you.”

Hijiri turned away again, and Ayaka felt her leave. A strange wave of anxiety washed over her all at once. It was not just the sadness of suddenly being alone; there was something else there too.

Hijiri-san... The way she left me with that smile. Why is it? Why do I feel this

way?

Somehow, I feel I'll never see her again.

Perhaps it was because her smile was so wonderful... It was so special, so unbelievable, so unprecedented—I can't help but feel anxious just thinking about it.

Suddenly, the Demon King advanced.

Is it because I'm alone now? Did Hijiri only leave because she's prepared to sacrifice me to this thing?

Creak.

Ayaka strengthened the *kyokugen* threads running through her body. She moved all the unique weapons floating above her into position to attack—her Silver World.

Right now, I need to trust Hijiri-san. She said she intends on coming back. She must be off doing something important...for us. It's so we can beat this thing. So right now...

Ayaka gripped her spear in one hand and her unique sword in the other.

"I have to do everything I can."

TAKAO HIJIRI

TAKAO HIJIRI RAN through the castle hallways, muffling the sound of her footsteps as best she could. She stopped by a door.

Around this time, it's most likely she's going to be in here.

Then the door opened in front of her.

"O-oh my? My, my, my~? I-if it isn't... Hijiri-san..."

The Goddess Vicius looked terribly pale—the door had opened slowly, and her arms looked almost too weak to hold it ajar much longer. There was nothing there the Goddess Hijiri knew—only her distinctive smile remained,

beaming as always.

“*Oh ho ho...* This sudden, strangely intense Demon King Essence... Whatever is causing it? It’s the Demon King himself I expect. But...why here, in the castle? How d-did he get in? *Oh o ho...*”

The Goddess looked so feeble.

“I may truly be in danger. I did consider evacuating to a separate location, but...ah... How glad I am that it was you at the door. The Demon King is out there, yes?”

“Yes, I believe so,” said Hijiri.

“In previous battles he must have seen how terrifying the heroes are now. Beyond imagination in fact... He’s fearful of your potential, of future development. That’s why he’s here in person to finish you. *Oh, ho ho...* Perhaps the Demon King has been more thoroughly cornered than I first th-thought...”

Though she was weak, she showed no signs of fear.

Hijiri lent her a shoulder for support.

“Oh, my...how kind. *Oh, ho ho...* If only you heroes could defeat the Demon King here and now. Oh, that would just be perfect...”

“Are you okay?”

“It pains me ever so much to admit, but even I am reduced to this state in the face of such powerful Demon King Essence ... *Oh, ho ho*. Might we go this way...?”

The Goddess raised a trembling finger down the hallway, leading away from the side of the castle the Demon King was inhabiting. Perhaps even moving a short distance away from him would relieve some of the fatigue his essence was causing her.

“Once we’ve gotten far enough away that you can move more freely, I believe we should join up with Sogou-san and Kiri-hara-kun. If the Demon King truly is already here—let us try to defeat him.”

“*Oh, h—* Wonderful... Truly wonderful, Hijiri-san...”

“My younger sister is currently working to determine the location of the source of this Demon King Essence. Once she has found it, she should give us a signal.”

“A s-signal?”

“I have been gathering sound spheres for some time—she will use one of them to contact me.”

“M-my, my... Is that so?♪ You’re ever so capable...♪”

“Even you are affected by the Demon King Essence, I see.”

“*Oh, ho...* as much as it embarrasses me to admit. B-but this is p-precisely why you Heroes from Another World are here... D-do you understand it now...? Perhaps?”

“Yes.”

“But well done... Coming to find me...”

“We need you in order to get back to our old world. It would be a terrible loss to us should you die here—and there is much that I still wish to ask you, Goddess...” Hijiri took a step down the hallway, in the direction the Goddess had indicated. “We need you to live.”

“*Oh oh ho...* O-of course. My... *Our* fates are intertwined, after all...”

The Goddess staggered and almost lost her footing. Hijiri reached an arm out before the Goddess, placing it to her chest as if to steady her.

“Gungnir.”

Takao Hijiri’s unique skill could take on the aspect of different elements in order to be used in different ways. But this presented Hijiri with a question—why was the base of her skill a *wind* type ability? As her unique skill continued to level up, Hijiri felt she understood why. The names of the Heroes’ skills appeared to be largely based on games from their home world—and Hijiri’s was no exception.

The name “*Gungnir*” was known far beyond the games that used the term—it was a famous spear from Norse mythology. The owner of Gungnir was the god Odin, known as a “God of Wind” to some. From “Wind” came “Gungnir,” a skill

which was a natural evolution of Hijiri's base abilities. The skill itself was incredibly simple—it sent out an extremely fast spear of energy at a target, focusing all her power into a single deadly offensive blow.



Perhaps because she's been so busy—or perhaps it is arrogance... But the Goddess has not been checking on our stat screens of late. Does she not know about the evolution of Ayaka's Silver World skill yet, perchance?

She had complete trust in Hijiri, in particular. Hijiri couldn't remember the last time she'd had her stats checked.

"Gungnir" is an advanced skill that the Goddess doesn't even know I have...

...

Fshhhhh...

"Wh-why... D-do you... You humans always..."

The right half of the Goddess's body had been ripped apart. She had dodged at the last moment, summoning every drop of strength she had left to get away. As a result—her body had not been completely destroyed by Hijiri's attack.

On the edges of her right side where the flesh had been destroyed, countless little worm-like tentacles were squirming and writhing about.

Her body must be trying to repair itself—but the process appears slow... The Demon King Essence is still having an effect on her.

The intact half of the Goddess's body was sweating, her face drenched. Half her face was exposed meat, and one eyeball hung free, with the socket surrounding it for protection. The left side of her mouth remained smiling as always.

I'm not sure about this. Is she cornered right now or not?

"Hijiri-san... Wh-y, I wonder? Y-you... D-don't you wish t-to... Return to your old w—"

"Fire Wind."

Hijiri couldn't use Gungnir in repeated succession—it would need some time before it could be used again. So she sent a blazing whirlwind towards her, the flames dancing around the Goddess to swallow her whole. Once again, the influence of the Demon King's essence had the Goddess unable to dodge

properly, and the right half of her body was bathed in flames.

Hijiri drew her sword and slashed at her in one clean motion. The Goddess jumped backward, looking as if it took every last drop of her strength to do so. She leaned back against the handrail of a balcony, then fell from the second floor to a hall on the first floor of the castle,

Is she trying to get away? Escaping to the first floor?

Hijiri maintained speed using her unique skill and pursued at once. With a single leap, she cleared the handrail.

She's gone.

There was no sign of her in the first-floor hall.

She shouldn't have been able to get far... No, wait.

Hijiri had seen her take *something* from her robes and drink it, just as the flames consumed her—she was sure of it.

Thoughts ran through Hijiri's head as she flew through the air.

Below the handrail, there's a space you can only see from the first floor—a mezzanine.

That was where she found the Goddess, stuck there upside down to the ceiling. She looked as if she was ignoring the rules of gravity, like some insect clinging to a smooth wall. She was sweating, like before, but also...regenerating. Her skin was still missing, but the bones of her missing arm and leg were already restored.

Something else was different too—where once there had been white and gold, now her eyes were dyed jet black. For a moment, a web of gold appeared there, a dull flickering, but disappeared as soon as it came.

“T-t-truly... T-truly, truly foolish. Ahh, but...t-to think I'd be forced to use *this* here. I really n-n-never thought I would...you know, Hi-ji-ri-sa-an? T-t-to think, to think! Oh, my, *oh oh ho!* ♪ *Oh oh? Oh oh ho...* Hu-man...” The black-eyed Goddess grinned down at her. “...P-p-pathetic!”

Hijiri fired off another inferno at the Goddess, causing her to leap off the ceiling like a cockroach, landing near the stairs that led back up to the second

floor. There was a deep red carpet that split off to the left and right as it curved up the stairs. On the wall behind her was a large statue of herself, pure and clean...which hardly bore any resemblance to the creature that now turned around to look at Hijiri.

“Wh-wh-what’s all this about? C-c-coming to betray me now, I truly c-cannot c-comprehend your actions. Y-you were the only one I really trusted, you know?! See, humans always betray you... Oh, I have such difficulty understanding all this! Woe is me... Ah! Hijiri, you’ve done it now! This isn’t on me anymore, okay! I mean it! It’s not my fault~!”

...She was having difficulty earlier—stammering—but she’s able to speak normally now. Something has changed.

Hijiri continued to observe.

The tentacles were still writhing on her body as they tried to repair it, her muscles had already started to form, and she was clearly recovering faster. Moving faster as well.

This recovery... It must have something to do with whatever she drank earlier. I had no idea she had such an item prepared or that she was hiding something capable of strengthening her abilities like that.

“...”

Do I really have her cornered right now? The sweat pouring from her body... that hasn’t stopped. It’s clear she’s moving much more freely now after drinking that black sphere, but even now it seems the Demon King Essence is having a huge effect on her. Am I right in assuming all this?

When she leaped to escape from me, it was in the opposite direction—away from the Demon King. She must sense where it’s coming from. Must have calculated it before she jumped.

Hijiri had noticed the glance the Goddess had shot in the direction of the Demon King as she had supported her.

She wanted to get away from it, even just a little—didn’t she? Even in her new powered-up form, she can’t stand to be near it?

The Goddess is smiling even still, her words are calm and came easily to her. But I'm starting to think it's possible it could all be a bluff. She's buying time for her body to recover.

Hijiri considered carefully whether to keep on the attack or not.

"Right... I've cornered you, haven't I?" she asked, finally.

"Oh? My, my—? You've been quiet for soooo long and now you're talking to me? The wind's blowing in some quite curious directions today, isn't it! H-how egocentric of you, to presume to question me!"

"..."

"I'd like to ask a question of my own if you don't mind! How could you be so foolish, doing a thing like this?! You're so mean!"

"That black sphere you drank after I attacked you... How many of them do you have left, I wonder?"

The Goddess blinked once, and her black eyes returned to their normal hue—but none of the intense aura she was giving off faded.

"Ah... Ah! I-I see..." The Goddess stared at her, craning her head a little to the left. "You can see through *lies*, can't you."

She's seen right through me. I was too forward, I knew it.

The Goddess brought both her hands together before her—though one of her arms was still knitting itself back together.

"I did think it was strange. You try to kill me in silence for so long, then suddenly you begin to speak...it really was quite disgusting. Ah, so it was *then*, wasn't it? Some time ago, you came to see me and asked whether I would really send you back to your old world. You must've *misunderstood* something I said that day! How unfortunate! You decided then and there to brand me a liar without even thinking to talk matters over with me... And now you're even attempting to kill me?! Ohhh... *Sob*... How terribly cruel of you!"

Even now, she's trying to pass all this off as a misunderstanding. She's not right in the head—not right at all.

"You are not the only divine, are you?" asked Hijiri.

“Ah—I see. You thought if you killed me, another divine could send you home instead? I see, I see, I see! You’re hoping for another divine to come along, more understanding even than I?! And you have no idea whether they even exist or not?!”

Got her.

The way I picture us getting home without Vicius—in reality it has nothing to do with relying on another divine’s help. It’s a method with a little more certainty than that—but thankfully she misunderstood my meaning, just as intended.

“Ahh, and yet...too bad! ♪ It appears you’ve failed to stop me, doesn’t it?”

Hijiri continued to watch closely.

“...Now, now. Why do you think I was able to dodge you at the last moment? When you lent me your shoulder, for a brief moment—*oh oh ho!*—you hesitated, didn’t you? Thought about going in the opposite direction, down the hallway and towards the Demon King. You thought being closer to the source of the essence, even just a single step in that direction, would increase your odds of success, did you not?”

She’s right.

“But within you, there was a slight moment of hesitation... The slim possibility that if you tried to lead me towards the source, that your whole surprise attack might be foiled. Oh, how unfortunate. ♪ I was made quite suspicious of you when you allowed me a glimpse of that inner conflict. And in the end, all you managed to do was mildly inconvenience me! Don’t -underestimate the gods.”

“ ... ”

“*Oh oh ho.* That Gungnir skill, or whatever it was...you can’t use it whenever you like, can you? It takes a certain amount of time before you can attack with it again, no? There have been several opportunities after that first attack, but you’ve refrained from using it. ♪ *Oh oh ho*, and whatever did you mean by that wind and fire attack? Are you *really* trying to kill me, I wonder? A-are you quite well? Might I doubt your sanity?”

Takao Hijiri, meanwhile, had developed a hypothesis.

“Oh oh ho... I’m not a fan of this at all, you know. ♪ First you fail to finish me off, and now—when you can clearly see how incredibly powerful I am—your expression hasn’t changed a bit! How rude! Why can’t you be more like Sogou-san, fainting and flinching and falling into despair? I simply can’t get into this at all, Hijiri-san!”

Hijiri jumped—a preemptive strike. She used the power of her Wind ability to close in on the Goddess with a single lunge. It was underpowered, but the Goddess made a move to prepare to receive her attack. The Goddess’s left arm, which had been saved from Hijiri’s first attack, pulsed with black veins—then transformed into a shape similar to the Demon King’s tentacle scythe.

The Goddess was completely ready for her now, but even so, Hijiri did not falter.

“Come on then, Hijiri Takao.”

She was almost upon her—Hijiri swung her sword. Her blade collided in the air with the tentacle scythe.

“Oh my?! How marvelously you bore the impact of that blow! My, my, my! Not half-bad Hijiri-san, not bad at all—! Ne-ver-the-less...”

The Goddess’s arm gaped wide open like a flower in bloom, warping to become two new tentacle scythes. The Goddess blinked again; her eyes were dyed black for a moment before returning to normal.

“Now it’s over.”

Then the wind swept in—a sudden localized hurricane, which the Goddess had probably not seen coming, swirling towards her.

Whoosh!

The Goddess’s two new tentacle scythes were blown behind her by the pressure.

“...!”

In a flash, Hijiri’s longsword sliced through the flesh of the Goddess’s right shoulder.

The sword itself was coated in raging blades of wind, swirling about it like

dust devils and increasing its effective range to carve meat from its hapless target. Hijiri's blade connected with an area of the Goddess's neck that was yet unhealed and took another chunk of flesh.

"...Now you've done it, Hijiri-san."

Hijiri continued on the offensive, not giving Vicius a moment to rest. The two tentacle scythes returned to block, and the Goddess jumped backwards to retreat.

"Blizzard Wind!"

Hijiri never let up as chunks of ice exploded in the air.

"This is... A-are you blocking my view...?"

Hijiri created ice, ruptured it with the power of her wind, and scattered the fragments. Before long, the whole area was blanketed in a fine dust of ice—blocking the Goddess's view.

Hijiri heard the sound of the air being split through as her blade sliced clean through the Goddess's left arm, severing the tentacle scythes.

"You're talking too much," said Hijiri, immediately moving in one swift motion to make her next attack.

She's trying to buy time with those speeches. Why? She must need to recover more to properly use her abilities. In her current state, there's a chance I can defeat her.

Hijiri knew it was a gamble, but she managed to land another attack with her sword.

The way the Goddess has been acting after drinking that black sphere... I know that under normal circumstances I wouldn't even have a hope of defeating her. But now she's under the influence of the Demon King's essence. I have this one chance—a limited period of time when she's weakened.

The Goddess's severed left arm fell to the floor with a sickening splat.

"I'm here to finish you. Right here."

"You brat."

My time limit—one hour.

Chapter 4:

Let the Wind Blow, with the smile of the White Goddess

HIJIRI TAKAO'S MIND was made up. The Goddess Vicius knew that.

She saw right through my attempt to buy time. She's smart, just as expected, but she's underestimating me.

The first action Vicius took was to retreat. She climbed the stairs with several steps and arrived at the top in the second-floor hallway once more.

*Hijiri will no doubt pursue, then we'll see how she attacks from th—
She's gone.*

Behind me. An aspect of her unique skill perhaps? She leaped above the stairs, never touching them once. Disguising the sound of her movement with that wind ability of hers I expect.

As the Goddess turned to face Hijiri, she transformed the bone of her right arm into an axe and parried a blow from her incoming sword, but the relentless wave of Hijiri's attacks never let up. She kept coming, mixing in attacks with her unique skill, showing no signs of slowing down.

"Cunning little one, aren't you," Vicius whispered to herself, too quietly for anyone else to hear.

Her attacks were constantly leading the Goddess closer and closer to the Demon King.

If I attempt to avoid her blows and go in the other direction, I'll surely be hit. This is a fine plan, well thought-out. Those twin sisters are smart; I always knew they were. It's not merely their unique skills and stat modifiers...their capabilities are impressive irrespective of those additions.

"A shame, truly... You would have been such a fine pawn..."

Vicius ran, and ran, and ran. It was all she could do to stay on the defensive and try to move away from the source of the Demon King Essence, even just a

little.

That would improve my regenerative abilities. That Root of all Evil truly is an irksome thing.

For one thing, a thick fog of the essence prevented the Goddess from using her divine-class magic abilities—she was rendered unable to even fire off a single fireball. Vicius leaped about the hallway like an insect, bumping against the walls as she went.

It's inelegant, but this is the best path to escape.

She landed. Before her was a passageway connecting the building she was in to another. There was a stone window fitted into the passage leading to the outside, with no pane of glass to block her escape.

Vicius looked around—there was no sign of Hijiri.

“Nevertheless... Is this *all* the power that consuming that treasured purple sphere has granted me?”

No. The fact that I am capable of moving to this extent under the influence of the Demon King Essence is enough. I am in an incredibly weakened state, yet I'm still managing to hold off Hijiri Takao.

But no matter how strengthened she might be—Vicius knew that as a divine, she would never be capable of defeating the Root of all Evil. The closer a divine came to the source, the more the burden would weigh upon them—far more than it would a human! And the attacks of a divine could have no effect on the Root of all Evil whatsoever. No matter how much they were able to move in his presence, a divine's attacks would, without exception, be completely ineffective against the Demon King.

I have no choice but to rely on those humans from another world—those whose attacks are capable of touching him.

Vicius's mind was racing.

Hijiri's betrayal... When did she begin to plot against me? Has she been working alone, or does she have supporters? If there are others, was Hijiri the one who suggested this betrayal scheme to them?

Or... Is she someone else's pawn?

Considering the timing...

"The most likely culprit is someone allied with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, of course."

Perhaps they whispered in her ear a method they thought capable of defeating me. How did I miss Mira spies sneaking into the capital?

Simple—I have been far too busy following the great invasion. I have worked myself to the bone covering for these useless humans. That has clouded my vision, blinded me to their espionage.

"But the Demon King... I never imagined he would come here in person... This is entirely unprecedented..."

There's something different about him—unlike any of the previous Roots of all Evil. He's learning too fast. How did he infiltrate the castle? By what means? ... Teleportation?

But only the divines are capable of such techniques.

If another divine came to this world, then I would know of it... So it cannot be their doing. Some ancient teleportation technique perhaps, from the depths of an unexplored underground ruin? But I have never heard of anything capable of being brought up to the surface such as that.

"Then..."

Does the Demon King this time around possess some special innate teleportation ability? No—if he did, it would be strange that he did not use it in the great invasion. It's something else—something that came into his possession after that first foray against us.

There was only one other item that came to the Goddess's mind.

"He has obtained a teleportation crystal, then."

But none of them are in Alion and of course none of the Magicians' Guild branches have any in their possession. They are the rarest of rare items—if anyone would have one, it would be...

That Insolent Forbidden Witch or Yonato...or the Empire of Mira.

Mira—the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

...Impossible—is he responsible for this attack? Did he deliberately hand over a teleportation crystal to the Demon King?

“If that is the case, then he is truly mad... Baron Pollary will once again be furious...! Oh, how terrifying...”

Now then, back to the matter at hand.

“Hijiri-san? Wherever have you gone? I’m going to be perfectly restored to fighting shape if you don’t do something~.”

No reaction—though hard to imagine she would run. This is a once in a lifetime chance for her. She must be about ready to fire another shot of her Gungnir skill at me. I cannot let myself be hit by that attack again in my current state.

Vicius focused all her regenerative power into restoring her severed right arm.

Hijiri Takao reacted well to the multiple blades I sent out from my right arm... It was almost as if she had experience fighting in such a manner—some precedent, perhaps. Only two exist who I suppose might be considered stronger than Hijiri Takao...

Takuto Kirihara, or...

“...Ayaka Sogou.”

What are the other S-class heroes doing anyway? Will they come to aid her? Is Hijiri waiting for their arrival?

If that’s the case, I should finish her off quickly...

She was right though... In betraying me now, her timing has been obscenely opportune. If she ever planned on doing it, this is the moment. There will never be a better chance.

Most are capable of the thought but cannot find the will to follow through, Vicius thought, granting her that bit of praise. Hijiri Takao however—she

possesses quite extra-ordinary mental fortitude, it seems.

“And yet, she remains a worthless human nonetheless.... ♪”

Vicius moved—knowing that if Hijiri were to attack, she should be capable of sensing her coming. She came out into a wide hallway similar to the one where they had fought moments ago. She looked out from a balcony to a hall on the first floor and saw several humans sprawled out on the carpet convulsing and spasming down below.

Perhaps soon they will die. Human life is so fragile, fleeting... Surprisingly amusing as well.

“I cannot sense her coming... She must have run. My, my...”

I never imagined the hero I trusted most of all would be the one I should have gotten rid of a long time ago.

“Worthless... You humans are always wasting the good will of the gods. Oh, it makes me so sad... *Sob, hic...* So very, very sad... *Sob!* You short-lived little trash creatures!”

The Goddess continued to regenerate.

“Well, no matter. The power of this deep purple sphere... It truly is magnificent. Once I have shaken off the feebling effect of the Demon King Essence...how powerful I shall be!”

One of the doors lining the hallway creaked open wide.

Perhaps it was already set ajar? The wind or something must have caused that sound.

“Ah...” *Wind.*

Hijiri Takao was closing in.

Was that creaking sound a sign of her approach?

Vicius was on alert, sensitive to the quietest of sounds—that must be why she caused that door to open... *Trying to pass it off as the wind blowing in through a window.*

In that brief moment when the Goddess Vicius’s attention was focused on the

sound, Hijiri Takao seized her opening and attacked. Vicius kept a clear head as she thought through the situation.

I felt no presence. I see...she's capable of concealing herself with that Wind ability of hers. Concealing sounds, hiding her presence. That unique skill is unusually versatile.

With some effort, Vicius warped the bone of her half-healed arm into a branching blade.

“Th-th-th-the impudence! Impu-impu-impu~hh... Ah... Wh-why must you do such up-p-psetting things, Hijiri-san?! Why did it come to this?!”

Her bone clashed with Hijiri's longsword, as Vicius continued to cry and entreat her with questions.

“Wh-wh-why can humans and gods not understand each other?! Why?! I'll k-k-kill you, brat!”

Hijiri's sword was no ordinary longsword—it was strengthened with the power of her Wind skill.

I'm injuring her—but with small, insignificant cuts. This bone blade is not serving me well against her.

Vicius's movements were somewhat slowed—the reason for which was simple.

She hasn't used it again—hasn't fired Gungnir. Is she waiting for the perfect opportunity? Is she even capable of doing it again?

Vicius had her doubts.

Perhaps she's unable to do it yet, and this is merely a bluff. Perhaps her aim is to impede my movements by the mere threat of using it again. Hijiri's fighting style is the very essence of impudence. She casually forces me deeper into the Demon King Essence with every strike. When I attempt to defy her and get away from it, she attacks me from disadvantageous angles.

“Oh, how terribly cunning. ♪ J-just die already, won't you?!”

An assortment of cheap tricks. She's incapable of defeating a god head-on, of course! Such a foolish girl...incapable of defeating me, even in this weakened

state.

But still, Vicius was being pushed back.

“Ah, curse you! This... It’s the Demon King, isn’t it?!”

The effect of the Demon King Essence was far beyond what Vicius had imagined possible. She glanced behind her—and began to retreat, pushed back by the pressure of Hijiri’s wind.

“You c-c-cunning little brat, you?! Looking down on the gods, are you?! Gah...?! Ah?!”

A heavy blow from Hijiri’s longsword sent Vicius reeling. She smashed hard against the wall and handrail, bouncing up to hit the ceiling, before finally colliding with the hallway handrail, her back to the wall.

Hijiri pursued—there was something different about her now.

“Impossible...” Vicius mumbled.

Does she intend on finishing it here—on using Gungnir against me?

“Hijiri-san! W-wait, please—!”

Vicius reached her hands behind her, and Hijiri froze.

Thrust.

“—”

“G-g-g-uess who~!♪”

Between Vicius and Hijiri was a small girl, held like a shield on Vicius’s arm... and now a blade was buried in Hijiri’s stomach—a *thing* that was warped into the shape of a sword. Vicius twisted it about, gouging the point into Hijiri’s insides.

“There was the door, the one you opened with your wind, no? That room... It was the one I lent to *her*. Yes... You know her, I believe. This noble girl...”

Vicius grinned.

“I found her over there, lying on the floor. ♪”

Vicius had seen the girl lying on the floor behind her, and so began her

retreat. She let herself be blown backward by Hijiri's attack in such a dramatic manner deliberately, aiming to crash down near the girl. It was precisely in the instant Hijiri came in for the finishing blow that Vicius grasped the limp girl to use as a human shield. Hijiri had stopped in her tracks, and Vicius took the opportunity to thrust at her with a hidden blade.

Vicius knew Hijiri had met this girl before...knew she had a relationship with the young noble, and had in fact been meeting with several Alion nobles of late. The Goddess was also aware Hijiri had been secretly seeking to obtain magical items and all manner of other things as well.

"I was entirely under the impression that you were preparing to defeat the Demon King... I never imagined you were getting ready to defy the gods. ♪ To be frank, I doubt your sanity. ♪"

Hijiri took a step back—free from the Goddess's blade, she stared silently at Vicius. For a brief flash, her eyes looked to the sword in Vicius's hands.

"Ah, this interests you, does it...? It's usually quite flat and flexible, like a piece of paper, almost... But pour in a certain amount of mana, and it forms into the shape of a sword, just like this. ♪ It's for emergencies, you see. ♪"

Vicius raised her eyebrows and squinted—she appeared to be holding back from laughing.

"I only ever used the bone blade attached to my arm. I expect you thought it the only weapon I possessed, didn't you? I didn't seem to be hiding any weapons either, of course. But I always have this blade at my side, tucked away just in case. Oh, and..."

The Goddess rose lightly from the carpet. "*Oh oh ho. ♪* How was my acting? Did you think I was distracted? Having difficulty, perhaps? Did you *really* believe you had cornered me? You were completely taken in, weren't you? *Oh oh ho!* You can tell the truth from lies, but you were entirely deceived by me, weren't you?! You couldn't see my true intentions! Oh, tricking you short-lived vermin is so fun! M-most of all... *Pfh-heh heh heh!*"

The noble girl in Vicius's arms was passed out, eyes rolled back in her head. Vicius took a step forward, dragging her along by her collar.

“You let the chance of a lifetime slip away, all for the life of this little girl! Are you insane, Hijiri-san?! Are you serious?! The moment I drew her up in front of me as a shield, you...you stopped your attack right there on the spot, didn’t you?! *Ah ah ha ha ha!* Ah, it’s just so funny! But truly, in earnest now...”

The Goddess’s smile vanished.

“It’s precisely that good-natured heart of yours that has saved my life... How do you feel right now? Come on... Say something, why don’t you? *Pffh, heh heh...* Hey. Are you listening, or what?”

Vicius’s face went blank.

There’s something funny here—as in wrong, not amusing. Hijiri Takao’s expression... It hasn’t changed a bit.

“Wh-what’s the matter with you...?”

No signs of panic—it’s as if none of this is registering with her. It was the same when I twisted the blade inside her—humans normally screw up their faces in pain, at least a little.

“It does seem like you’re in pain right now... It’s faint, but I see it in your eyes, those emotions you’re trying to hide. If you felt no pain, had no emotions whatsoever...then well, I could understand. But you...you feel it, but you’re suppressing it with your mind, aren’t you...? No, it can’t be.”

But if this is a sign of her mental fortitude, then... Hijiri Takao is abnormally tough.

Vicius puffed out her cheeks and pouted. “You think keeping your nerve means you’ve beaten me, do you? How awfully mean!”

But well...

“You must be the first human in history to endeavor quite so successfully to defeat me. I shall at least compliment you on that. But...you’re in quite the predicament, no? That wound *is* rather deep, isn’t it? Oh my, I see you withering before my very eyes...”

Hijiri pressed a hand to her wound and dropped down to one knee.

“*Heh heh.* ♪ You may try to hide it, but the truth is you’re weakening... *Ha...*”

How disappointing!”

Vicius tossed the noble girl off to the side and waited a while, focusing all her energy on preparing to dodge...

“...”

...But Gungnir never came.

“*Oh oh ho...* As I thought, that Gungnir skill takes considerable time to recharge after the first shot. Once a day? Well, in any case...” She raised her arm above her head. “...this is the end for you.”

“Gungnir.”

With a surge of light, the booming roar of Hijiri’s attack echoed down the hallway.

“...So you *were* able to fire it again, I see.”

Vicius lowered the arm she had raised to protect her face. Hijiri was gone.

She must have run.

“You might have been able to defeat me, had you been willing to catch that girl in the blast radius... My, my—humans are just as worthless as I thought. ♪”

Another attack from that impudent Gungnir skill of hers...

Vicius’s injuries were lighter than those from the first attack. She was further from the source of the Demon King Essence now—and most of all, the deep purple sphere had greatly improved Vicius’s abilities. Much of the damage had been blocked.

But that Gungnir skill of hers—it was weaker than the first time. Perhaps she needs time to charge it up with energy? No... She merely wished to avoid hitting that noble girl with her attack.

“Naive, through and through...”

Vicius scanned the floor—there was a blood trail spattered on the carpet.

“You’re not getting away.”

Vicius pursued, following the trail of blood to an open stone window in the connecting hallway that led out into the grounds. There was blood carpet before the window frame.

“Did she jump from here, I wonder? No...”

This trail is too obvious...

Looking closer, Vicius saw faint spots of blood that continued on down the hallway.

“You haven’t the strength to outrun me, so you intend on concealing yourself somewhere until the heat dies down, don’t you? Or perhaps you hope the Demon King finishes me off while you’re in hiding.”

Vicius descended a flight of stairs, following the trail of blood through the castle kitchens.

Those kitchen cabinets look spacious enough to fit a human inside.

Vicius stood before one of the cabinets which the blood trail appeared to have trailed off right in front of. Seizing the door, she pulled open the cabinet with force, and...

“Long time no see! ...Oh?”

She isn’t here. What’s that smell of burning meat anyway...? Well, I suppose these are the kitchens.

“No. She’s... Oh my...”

...She cauterized the wound to stop the bleeding. This trail of blood... It was a tactic to buy her time. Now she is capable of running without leaving a trace behind.

Does she have time to be pulling these cheap tricks? Why not just devote herself completely to the escape?

That is what most people would do... At a glance, these efforts seem wasted. But perhaps with her wind abilities, such tricks only require a few seconds to accomplish?

Her skills are incredibly flexible—it would be foolish of me to think her

incapable of such feats. It's likely she spent far less time on this than it might first appear.

Looking out from the open door from the kitchen, Vicius saw *signs* meant to deceive her dotting her path out there as well.

"Hijiri Takao... You're annoying to the very last."

TAKAO HIJIRI

TAKAO HIJIRI TRIED to make her way out of the castle.

Most people would try to run towards Sogou Ayaka in this situation—after all, the Goddess can't approach the Demon King, the source of the Demon King Essence. But going against her expectations, I—

"Wah!"

The Goddess appeared right in front of her.

"Good... You've done well. But this is as far as you come." The Goddess tittered. "I gave it quite some thought. Of course one would normally run to Sogou-san for help...and approaching the Demon King would make it rather difficult for me to follow. But...what if Takao Hijiri decides instead to leave the castle at once, I pondered? If that were the case, then this would be your only escape route."

She's right. I expected the Goddess to think I would head for the Demon King, but she was already one step ahead of me. I couldn't run to Sogou Ayaka though. That was never an option. If I should fail here, I can't have her caught up in this.

Joining back up with Ayaka would do nothing but put her at risk.

She should know almost nothing about my plan to betray the Goddess. I haven't told her a thing about it. There's been nothing written about it in my notes, nor have any of the orders I gave to Ayaka ever been directly connected to this betrayal plan.

“This was all the work of Takao Hijiri, and Takao Hijiri alone.” I made sure that’s how it would be.

“But well, that noble girl... From what I could observe, it was a deep-seated lust that inspired her to cooperate with you, was it not? An impossible love, a yearning, a desire to possess you... All of it boils down to mere lust in the end. To think you would let such an opportunity pass you by, for one such a slave to her desires. *Heh heh.*”

“...You’re too quick to judge humans as a foolish species.”

“Eh? But you *are* foolish, no? Foolish and funny... And with such pathetically short life spans. You make the same mistakes over and over again. It repeats generation after generation; I simply get sick of watching it all. Humans are unbelievably stubborn and never try to learn from history. No matter how many wise or talented individuals your society produces, they’re always worn down by the violence and blind desire of the masses, aren’t they? ♪ Humans will always be fools. ♪ That does make you much easier to manipulate though I suppose. ♪ Humans are evil at heart when it comes right down to it.”

“I cannot claim that all the humans in existence are pure and good people, myself included... Yet there do exist those deserving of respect—those with dignity and good hearts. Not all of us are fools either. The good...they are not as few and far between as you would believe.”

The Goddess applauded.

“Th-th-there it is, the whitewashing! The hypocrisy! The ignorance! Only seeing what you want to see, hearing what you want to hear! Believing what you want to believe! You cover up everything that’s inconvenient to think about with your sophistry and avert your eyes from the root of the problem! Then in the end your breath runs out and you begin to suffocate on your own stupidity! Truly pitiful... I’ve watched the pathetic history of the human race for so long now! And here it is once more! The foolish, self-loving farce you creatures are so adept at! You never try to understand your problems until it’s too late to do anything about them—do you?! Whereas I have everything I need right here. ♪”

“I-I...”

“Yes, yes, what now?”

“I have not lived long enough to despair for the human race as a whole, but is it not you who are averting your eyes? Labeling everything whitewashing... You’re so desperate to deny everything good about our race. Unfortunately for you, there is good in us humans—I know it. Not to mention this foolishness you speak of. It seems we humans and divines share that in common.”

Hijiri paused, then continued, her next words tinged with sarcasm.

“Don’t tell me you think you’re any different?”

“Eh? Suddenly trying to debate with me now? Y-you’re about to die, I hope you’re aware...”

Hijiri created a whirlwind to collect a chunk of ice—and exploded it with Blizzard Wind.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

“My, my, resisting to the end? Now you intend on using this skill to obstruct my view. Will you pointlessly flail against your fate this time, I wonder? Cauterizing your wound has done nothing to heal the damage, you know?”

Behind the Goddess—using her Unlock One skill to approach at incredible speed from a long distance away in a single instant—was Takao Itsuki.

“Just buying some time,” said Hijiri.

“Lightning Shifter.”

The Goddess turned around in a flash.

“The ice wasn’t to obscure your vision... The exploding ice was to mask the sound of Itsuki’s skill... To make absolutely sure you couldn’t hear it...”

The very limits of Unlock—at last the final lock is turned.

“Lock End.”

THE GODDESS VICIUS

“...OH MY, she’s gotten away from me again. ♪”

Vicius's movements felt slow—numb.

Her little sister's unique skill is to blame, no doubt. Her incredible speed is a problem also—I cannot pursue her at present.

“I thought that was an attack against me... But it was all in an attempt to escape, I see.”

Faced with an unknown skill, Vicius had blocked instinctively...and the two sisters had sped away.

I could have easily caught them were it not for this Demon King Essence... Though I'm sure this new skill of Itsuki Takao's has a very small part to play in my current condition as well.

“And yet, to think those two forced me to consume my deep purple sphere... Oh, how vexing.... ♪”

Most vexing of all is this Demon King Essence blanketing the area. Oh, how it irritates me...

The Root of all Evil truly is the natural enemy of all divines...

“...”

Vicius stopped moving, feeling suddenly a little foolish.

“My, my?”

The Demon King Essence... It's gone?

SOGOU AYAKA

AS SOON AS Takao Hijiri had left, the Demon King began to close in. He stopped a short distance away from Ayaka, and the tentacle scythes rushed out, their tips gleaming as they shot towards her.

In the next moment, the blades were glowing, shooting forth beams of purple light—a kind of magical attack. Sogou Ayaka was closing in on the Demon King as well.

Those beams of light...he can't fire them instantaneously. There's a small momentary delay before he can shoot.

Ayaka saw the beams coming and easily dodged out of their way. From her perspective, the delay between aiming and firing was an opportunity the enemy had given her. It was the only reason she had been able to get in so close in the first place.

She directed the unique weapons floating in the air nearby to join her in the attack. The Demon King immediately began responding with his tentacle scythes. The sounds of weapon clashing on weapon filled the air—the endless shower of sparks proof of how fearsomely the blades were colliding overhead.

The paths at times like the curve of an infinite crescent moon, and at other times a straight line of blinding light. Their feet pounded the hard dirt underneath, sending clouds of sand and dust flying up into the air as they withdrew from one another. Their fierce attacks fell like early summer rain, the sound of blade on blade clanging.

The attacks continued, blow after blow, each of them tried to get the upper hand over the other, searching for the way to beat their opponent as they grew faster still.

They were evenly matched.

Ayaka honed her senses even further. She let her muscles relax, tightening the *kyokugen* threads that ran through them even further. Her heavy attacks transformed into what sounded like exploding thunderbolts, echoing across the castle grounds. Each blinding attack looked like a flurry of sparks had been mixed with a seismic event.

At last, Ayaka had definitive proof.

The Demon King—he's learning as he fights.

He launched two more magical attacks at Ayaka, but both were just openings she was presented with to goad her into a disadvantage.

"Attacks that take time to charge up are actually hurting me against this opponent"—it seems that he knows that now. At present he's only attacking with several of those tentacles of his, and...

Thud!

The massive fist sailed right by Ayaka's cheek, barely missing her. There had been no warning of the attack.

But I can still dodge it—just seeing the attack coming is enough. It might even be easier to avoid than those tentacle scythes, given that that huge fist attack isn't capable of any small movements.

What scared her the most were the tentacle scythes—the simplest attacks.

Just how long have we been fighting here, neither of us giving any ground? It feels as if we're the only two beings in the world right now.

Their exchange stretched on and on—long enough that Ayaka could almost feel time slipping away. Suddenly, she realized something.

The Demon King is learning my movements...but he's not trying to mimic me. His attack patterns are his own. Imitation can only get you so far, after all. It won't let you surpass your opponents. He's understanding, then incorporating my movements into his own—that's how he intends to overcome me. He's rapidly refining his techniques in the midst of battle—growing with tremendous speed.

The Demon King was incredibly strong of course—but it was the rapacious speed at which he absorbed information that amazed Ayaka most of all.

The more we cross blades...the better his techniques become. I know I'm meant to buy time, but if things continue at this rate—I won't be able to keep up with him for much longer.

Ayaka made the decision then and there. She resolved to find an opening and finish the Demon King off. Her mind made up, she still had to find an opening to exploit. She honed all her senses to keep a single split-second -opportunity from passing her by. She kept up the flurry of fierce blows against the Demon King but began mixing in sharp thrusts.

The Demon King responded in kind. The battle quickly became a race to find that one attack that could settle it all.

With my skills leveled up, I can stay in this fight! But if I'm capable of ending

this, I should do it as soon as possible!

The next moment, a cold shiver ran down the length of Ayaka's spine. The sudden idea that struck her gave her goosebumps—made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

Two threads.

The way I visualize the kyokugen threads running through my body... Usually I only picture a single thread, but the masters are capable of creating two...

Two threads to double the power...and double the toll this technique will take on my body. If it seems like too much, I can stop whenever I need to. But if I'm truly going to finish this now, then...

...It's worth a shot.

Visualize it...

One more thread.

From this thread to my very limit.

From one to two.

She winced as two twinges of pain shot through her.

"The Dual Kyokugen"

With the new speed of her dual threads, Sogou Ayaka launched a rain of blows on her enemy with blinding speed.

I did it...!

The Demon King was clearly faltering in his attacks, moving to the defensive. Ayaka saw her opportunity and pressed her advantage, doubling down. The beast was adept at defending himself, and the moment he switched off the attack his movements became much more precise. The limit of the Demon King's potential for growth however...that Ayaka did not know.

I think right now my technique is surpassing his... But if his technique develops enough to catch up to mine, he could still turn the tide of this battle. I might be at an advantage now, with these dual threads—but give him enough time, and I can't be sure. Right now, while I still can, I have to—

Then...

“...!”

...Ayaka heard the sound of the dirt crunching underfoot.

It's faint, but...

The Demon King stepped backward—it was hardly anything, but...

Is that an opening?

It was such a small thing, but Ayaka didn't let it slip away.

If this isn't that once in a lifetime chance, then what is?

I can do this!

Ayaka ground her feet hard into the ground, then launched herself toward him with a slash.

Blood sprayed out through the air.

Knees collapsed to the dirt below.

The Demon King fell.

“You're naturally talented, Ayaka, but you were born into a time and a place where these weapons simply aren't needed anymore. Is that a blessing or a curse? I can't say...”

Those were the words of Ayaka's grandmother.

Sogou Ayaka was good-looking, with an amazing figure—a beautiful young woman by anyone's reckoning. But she was more than just her appearance. She was master of both the pen and the sword—her test results were brilliant, her records in P.E. class outstanding. She enjoyed athletics and academics in equal measure. In addition, she was the granddaughter of the chairman of the famous Sogou Group—a real-life princess if ever there was one. She served as class representative at school and was sensible and caring with her classmates.

And she was taught the Kisou style of ancient martial arts from her grandmother. Her grandmother called her a genius, without a hint of nepotism.

She knew Ayaka better than anyone else.

In the old world, nobody saw Ayaka's talents—they only saw all the other things about her.

They saw the beauty of her face, or the well-balanced lines of her body, her tight waist. They saw her academic prowess or her incredible talent for athletics. Perhaps they recognized the bright future that her family name promised to bring. She was super rich but never boasted of it. As class representative, she was completely devoted to the work, both skilled and compassionate... Yet -nobody in that world recognized the *real* Sogou Ayaka.

The Demon King had now met two S-class heroes in the previous battle, on the eastern front—Kirihara Takuto and Takao Hijiri.

"So this is what I face," he thought.

He'd prepared a surprise teleportation attack on the Kingdom of Alion. After his experience fighting the S-class heroes on the eastern front, the Demon King had resolved to see it through—but he'd miscalculated. There was one S-class hero the Demon King had yet to meet.

Sogou Ayaka.

He had heard her name—she was the hero who defeated Zweigseed. The reports suggested she'd struggled to defeat him. A man in a Lord of the Flies mask and his subordinates, along with an army of strange magical creatures, had carried the day at the White Citadel, not her. Zweigseed had also been thrown off by the death of Einglanz at the time of his defeat.

"Ayaka took the opportunity to cut him down from behind, that is all," the reports suggested. From the information he had, the Demon King had no reason to view Sogou Ayaka as a threat.

But he was wrong—and now she stood before him, his greatest *miscalculation*.

He didn't know.

"I was not told she was such a threat."

If a person's true form was who they *really* were, then everything Sogou Ayaka had ever been complimented on in her former world was just for show. It wasn't that she had diluted her talents to hide her true self—it was the exact opposite. The other aspects of Sogou Ayaka's character shone so bright that their glare hid the truth of who she was. Now, the strength of her unique skill had nothing to do with her real power.

Her talents had bloomed here. It had become clear to all that—when it came to her skill as a fighter—Sogou Ayaka was a rare genius.

The Demon King's body was enveloped by black fog... But from the position of his mouth, it looked as if he'd been brought to his knees.

And he's bleeding. It's safe to assume he has a physical form somewhere in there. Direct attacks against him can get through!

She placed a hand to the necklace that Hijiri had given her and made her decision in an instant—hesitating here would mean letting the chance slip away. Just then the Demon King spit something up.

A crystal?

It rolled across the stones before him, and Ayaka had a bad feeling about the item immediately. A human *hand* emerged from the black fog, riddled with purple veins. It reached out to try and grab the crystal, but Ayaka would not let it. Catching a spear that had fallen nearby with her feet, she kicked it upwards, grabbed it in one hand, and threw. The tip of the spear knocked the crystal away. It wasn't destroyed, but it was beyond the reach of the Demon King. His hand stopped, and his face—that mouth, turned towards her.

“Whatever it is you're trying to do... I won't let you.”

She directed all her unique weapons at the Demon King. His tentacle scythes multiplied—but before that there was a strange pause.

It almost looked as if he'd given up. Or do my eyes deceive me? He's still resisting, but that crystal...was it his escape?

“You are...”

The Demon King spoke—but Ayaka was unshaken.

“...my greatest miscalculation.”

I’m going to finish this here. I want to go back to the old world.

Going home was Ayaka’s chief motivation of course, but it was more than just that.

So many people died at the White Citadel of Protection... All on the Demon King’s orders. No matter what his reasons were, after seeing what happened on that battlefield, I...I won’t let you go.

Bwhooosh!

Light raced toward her.

“I-it can’t be—!”

Ayaka’s unique blades were all blocked—by a single *katana*.

“What is this, Sogou...? You think you’re Kirihara or what? No. *You’re wrong. I’m Kirihara...*”

He had launched his Dragonic Buster at them from the side, riding it in towards her from all the way across the ruined castle grounds. Kirihara now understood how to use his ability as a means of getting around.

He’s okay. He must have just been knocked out by the Demon King’s blow. He’s bleeding... But the damage doesn’t look too serious.

“K-Kirihara-kun, don’t interfere!”

“I can do nothing but throw those exact same words right back in your direction...”

Ayaka made up her mind...

I have no time for dealing with Kirihara at present. I should knock him out of the picture immediately and move on to dealing the Demon King a finishing blow.

Ayaka only hesitated for a split second, then launched a disabling attack

toward Kirihara...

...But without warning, the blunt weapon Ayaka had directed at Kirihara was deflected—by one of the Demon King’s tentacle scythes.

The Demon King protected Kirihara-kun?!

“Tch... That must’ve been your best shot, huh... Not bad, I have to admit.”

Kirihara leaped backwards to stand by the Demon King’s side.

“Why... You are a Hero from Another World. Why save me?”

“Because they don’t get it...”

“?”

“We’ll talk later—she’s coming.”

Ayaka had no intention of letting them finish their conversation—she charged towards them in attack. Both Kirihara and the Demon King responded defensively—she had no way of getting through to them.

One of them, I could take... But the way they’re both moving, it’s like they’re in perfect sync with each other.

...No! It’s just the Demon King... He’s perfectly matching Kirihara’s movements! He learns so fast!

Ayaka began to struggle against them—she well knew how troublesome the Demon King could be when he focused entirely on defense. But he should have been crippled by his injury. Now with Kirihara Takuto on his side however—Ayaka couldn’t land a single attack.

Kirihara sent out several small golden dragons to circle him.

“Demon King... The reason I saved you, was because none of those 2-C idiots have ever tried to understand it, Sogou Ayaka included. They’ve never understood me, the true vessel of the king...”

“...”

“Then that incompetent Goddess... The Sacred Alliance has barely made use of my talents at all. It made me think, you see. What was the problem? And I understood it right away... It’s only because we’re allies that these people have

never met the true Kirihara!”

The Demon King listened in silence, appearing to be trying in earnest to understand what Kirihara was saying.

“I knew what I had to do. To thrust the true Kirihara right in their faces! I need to prove it to them, show them the true form of a king! I’ll become king of their enemies, all to show them!”

He gestured to Ayaka, clenching his fist tightly in the air and brandishing it at her.

“2-C left me no choice but to oppose them—to become their enemy...!”

“...You are a Hero from Another World, yet you wish to join me?”

“That’s why I saved you.”

“You are a strange man... No deceit.”

Kirihara looked confused.

“A true king has no need for lies. He is the *only truth*.”

Kirihara’s words were a betrayal, and they shocked Ayaka to her core. She had never expected he would side with the Demon King, never in her wildest dreams could she have seen it coming. After a short time she snapped back to attention, suppressing her anxiety for a moment.

“K-Kirihara-kun! If we defeat the Demon King, we’ll be able to go home, to the old world! This is our chance, the best we’ve got! Step aside! Please!”

Kirihara sighed.

“I just realized it, you know...?”

“Eh? Realized what...?”

“If we make it back to the old world, I won’t be able to fully realize the kingliness within me... All that awaits me is a cage, locked and unable to move as I please. No matter how much I succeed there, I’ll never be able to break through that ceiling...! But in this world, I could have a nation of my own! I could never found a new country in the past world! But what about here?! With enough power, it’s possible...! This world has freed me! Unleashed me! I have to

bloom and develop as a king here! No matter what, I... I will be king!"

"What... What are you rambling on about, Kirihara-kun?"

"Oh, and you—Demon King... I'll overlook that attack you landed on me earlier... We were just messing around, nothing more..."

"I do not quite comprehend, but very well."

The Demon King rose, swaying as he did so.

"In your words there are no lies... You speak from the heart, not to deceive me... I understand that."

The Demon King stood beside Kirihara.

"I will accept you, Kirihara—as my follower."

"N-no, don't Kirihara-kun! Let's... Let's talk about this some more! I don't know if I can come to understand you, but... B-but maybe Hijiri-san could."

"You think this is the time for jokes, Demon King...?" Ayaka's words hadn't even reached his ears. "Follower? I, *Kirihara*? If you're seriously suggesting that, you're out of line..."

"Then... What is it you desire?"

"I can only be your ally."

"Ally..."

"I, Kirihara, will form an alliance with the Demon King's armies. We stand on equal footing, kings together... These are the only conditions I will accept—the only way it can be."

"...Very well. We have an alliance, you and I. Equal footing..."

"Just for a second there, I saw something... A little Kirihara inside you. You showed it to me, didn't you?"

"?"

At that moment, Kirihara sent out a single golden dragon. Ayaka tried to stop it—but the two of them moved into position to intercept her. She understood at once just how difficult the two of them would be to deal with—the Demon

King had matched his movements perfectly to Kirihara's.

So this is how strong they can be when both are focused on defense. No—it's not just that... I can't give it my all in this fight—not against a fellow classmate.

Ayaka was prepared to kill the Demon King... But killing one of the members of 2-C she had sworn to protect? That was unthinkable. She constantly struggled to avoid dealing a lethal blow to Kirihara who was focusing on blunting her attacks.

"The thing you lost—is this it...?" asked Kirihara as the single golden dragon had brought him back the crystal which Ayaka had knocked from the Demon King's reach. He handed it to the Demon King—who gripped it tightly in hand as it began to glow.

"Kirihara... You wish to come...with me?"

"What I want's got nothing to do with it. I've got to. As a true king, it's my obligation."

"Understood... We go to the farthest reaches of the north."

"W-wait, Kirihara-kun! I... I know I didn't try to engage with you as much as I should have, I was wrong! I'm sorry! I just felt I couldn't understand your way of thinking... But I should have tried! I ended up leaving it all to Hijiri-san. But I was wrong, I know!"

"..."

"So I just need a little more time—please, just a little longer! I'm begging you...!"

"Don't move, Sogou..."

Kirihara pointed his katana towards her, ready to fire off his golden dragons at a moment's notice. He tilted his neck to the side a little, and it cracked.

"Don't worry... I intend on letting as many of 2-C live as I can. Can't go about proving the true Kirihara to them if they're dead. But—I won't show mercy either. We're enemies now..."

"Kirihara-kun!"

Her words sailed right past him—as if they had never even reached his ears.

“You... Sogou?” The Demon King spoke to her. “Your failure to stop me today will echo through the events which are to come. Remember this...I will hurt you. Await my coming. The nightmare that will consume this world. I will annihilate all. Through our battle today, I have come to well understand my miscalculation. Of all you Heroes from Another World, I know now *who* I should be most cautious of!”

“I, Kirihara, of course. It could be no one else.”

A magic circle of light appeared on the ground, and particles of light rose up from it as its pale glow intensified.

Kirihara stared at Ayaka silently, as if looking down on her from above.

“Unfortunate for you... But you people were never able to understand the real me. You could not see your true king. It’s far too late for you to cry for my return now... It’s inevitable... You’ll all come to realize it...”

Kirihara pointed the tip of his katana at Ayaka, golden dragons swirling all around him.

“Realize how much you’ve lost... Remember, Sogou. You will never be Kirihara...!”

The words rang in her ears. She struggled in vain to convince him as Kirihara Takuto and the Demon King vanished together into nothingness.

“Kirihara-kun...!”



Chapter 5:

The Light at the Very End

THE RAIN FELL HARDER with every passing moment, splashing against the stones and making the dirt heavy and sodden below. The rainwater formed rivers, flowing into grooves in the ground. The intense pounding of raindrops sounded like the steady beat of war drums, spurring them onward to battle. The hooves of the mounted knights' mounts splashed through puddles of water as soaked demi-humans desperately swung their weapons at the enemy. The central battlefield was in complete chaos.

Two leopardmen dragged a knight from his horse and skewered him as he lay helpless on the ground. Some knights leaped from their own horses, screaming happily as they cut down the leopardmen around them. The central forces were battling a new enemy—a new order of knights was upon them.

One man stood before the rest.

The mud had sprayed up at him, but he never thought to wipe it from his face—his eyes fixed only on what was in front of him. Both sides of his head were bare, and there were symbols shaven into the hair on top of his scalp. He looked fearless—there was a raging but silent will to fight within him. His cheeks were unshaven, and there were lines carved into his face and arms. He was of medium build and his body was dense with muscle but didn't look hard or stiff. His muscles appeared pliable, flexible as a branch that would bend but not break.

He had the eyes of a warrior—in his hand, a longsword.

“Not bad, leopardman... I'd like your name, if you can speak it.”

“...Geo Shadowblade.”

“A good name. I am the captain of the Second Order of Knights, Rashid Dead Stolid. I am the Dead Warrior—my soul belongs to the Dead God of War.”

Geo Shadowblade readied himself for battle—it was rare for him to take an

enemy so seriously.

The last time would be... When I sparred with the Princess Knight, maybe.

“You’re the strongest knights we’ve faced so far...” he said.

“Likewise, you are the strongest warrior I have met this day.”

“But what the heck’s wrong with your order? It’s like they don’t fear dying. Are they sane, accepting their own deaths with open arms?”

Rashid lightly tossed his rusted longsword about in his hands, shifting his grip a little. Each mark on that sword spoke silently of his long days in battle. His body swayed from side to side.

That’s how he prepares to strike... Makes it hard to read when he’s coming.

“When the Dead are killed in battle, provided we bring no shame upon ourselves as warriors, we are called up by the Dead God of War after our passing. Our names listed the honored. We in the Second Order wish for a brave and courageous death. We search out battle until our dying days. We enjoy life to the fullest, sometimes take wives and start families, raise the next lives to come... And then seek battle until we are granted a courageous death at last.”

“Well... Fighting ain’t all we care about. We ain’t that simple, y’know? But hey... Can’t say I don’t envy you a little.”

“I promise you this. Enemies of the Dead who die valiantly will have their corpses respected in defeat. Courage exists for both enemy and ally alike—the God of War smiles on all who are brave.”

“Thanks...but what about the people that can’t fight?”

“Annihilation. Some will be taken as slaves, spoils of war. But worry not. The slaves will help us father children. If they and the children accept the Dead, they can join our order as well.”

“Really doesn’t feel like I can get on board with that...”

The two swordsmen focused their energies—both grinding their feet into the dirt ready to leap.

“Allow me to send you to see that War God of yours!”

“Very good. Come.”

Then it began.

On the eastern front, a new battle was taking place.

The hound of hell, Loa, slipped on the muddy ground. He dug his claws into the dirt and found his feet, then drew himself low, waiting. The heads to his left and right began to growl, intimidating their foes.

A shirtless man appeared, with unusually long green hair. It fell over his face, his eyes only visible occasionally when they peeked out from the gaps in his fringe. His skin was white, completely unscarred—and in each hand he held a serrated longsword. His swords were almost as long as his hair.

...Longer than Geo's blades, even.

“Ahh... B-beautiful. That fur...those fangs, those eyes... You will make such wonderful materials I'm sure. *Sob...* I'm so grateful, so moved. The rain is falling...yes, but not a storm, no... In any case, I'm just so grateful!”

We're outnumbered.

Loa bared his teeth.

These knights are strong. My pack is struggling against them.

Loa heard his heart beating, quickening with every second that passed.

I have to defeat this strange man and save the others!

“Your name?! If possible... I-I do like to add name tags to the pieces I craft, to show who they are! Ah, I'm sorry! I should give my own name first, yes?! I am captain of the Eighth Order of Knights...Lugein Goffgorio! I strive every day to be the best craftsman in the whole world, you see! S-so... What's your name?!”

Baffled by the sudden question, the hellhound managed to spit out, “...Loa.”

“L-Loa?! Wh-why...what a stunning name! It's short, but...that's what makes it so wonderful! I-I just want to dissect you, right here on the spot! S-so grateful...”

“I’m not going to let you dissect me... Don’t under-estimate us monsters.”

“Monsters, humans, anything will do! I’m grateful for everything in this world! First and foremost, I must thank your parents for bringing such a marvelous hound of hell into this world! *Sob...* Oh, life... The world is so beautiful—yes, let’s have a most appreciative dissection, shall we?! That sounds lovely! Let’s begin!”

“Let’s go.”

At Loa’s signal, his left and right heads roared into life.

Beaten by the rain—the hound of hell leaped ferociously at the enemy.

MIMORI TOUKA

THE RAIN BEAT DOWN as if mirroring the intensity of the fighting that was underway.

We’ve held.

Even without Seras by her side, Kil’s orders remained consistent. There were places where forces were being somewhat pushed back, but somehow the lines held. Geo and the others fighting in the center were particularly stubborn—the Band of the Shining Leopard had yet to take a single step back from their position.

“The eastern and western flanks are struggling...”

Once Seras has returned to the main camp, will her leadership be enough to force the enemy back?

“Report!” A messenger appeared before me. “The enemy seems to be closing in on the western front! For now we are retreating as ordered... But it appears this may be an enemy scouting force! Wh-what are your orders?!”

The Sixth Order are gone—but here come the others, eh? The western front only has an army of monsters, and the remnants of the Band of the Shining

Dragon. Without Niko they're lacking in leadership—we shouldn't chase the enemy too far. Plus, there's what happened earlier...

“Doesn't matter if the western flank has to retreat quite some distance. We'll lose the terrain advantage, but it'll give us a faster route to reinforce. The more they pull back, the less isolated they'll be.”

Isolated and eliminated—that's a worst-case scenario we can avoid.

“My master. I intended on returning to our main camp, but do you think I should turn back and lead our forces on the western front?”

“You may leave those in the west to me.”

“N-Niko-dono?!” Seras exclaimed in shock.

“I have gathered those that can still fight and returned.” Niko led a group of bandaged dragonkin soldiers behind her, victims of the Sixth Order attack.

She's right—now those body parts have been cut from them, and they've been freed from their bonds... Some of these soldiers look like they could go back to the front lines—Niko herself included.

“Are you sure you can do this, Niko?” I asked.

“I heard the report that just came in. You defeated the Sixth Other, did you not?”

“It was the scattered soldiers of the Band of the Shining Dragon and those monsters that finished them off, but yeah.”

“But you are the ones that truly defeated them, no?”

“...Guess so.”

“Hmph, I did not think it possible, but thank you.”

“I'll leave the western flank to you then,” I said. I spurred Sleif onward, and we slowly passed Niko by.

“Of course. The west was my post to begin with. I will fulfill my duties as commander there!”

“Lady Niko, I wish you good fortune in battle.”

“You too, oh, beautiful swordswoman.”

We turned our separate ways and left, Seras and I to the central front, and Niko to the west.

I'm grateful to have her back in the fight...

“Ah, there you are! R-report!” Another messenger flagged us down. “Geo and his forces in the center have engaged in battle with the Second Order!”

So now the Second Order's finally made their move, huh?

“B-but, well...they are split into several smaller units and spread wide. Scattered all across the central front, it appears...”

So they're individual squads, moving independently. They aren't relying on numbers to break though. Does this mean each of their knights are really strong enough for those tactics to work?

“Seras, you head back to the main camp as planned.”

“Understood. Where will you go?”

“Squee! Squ-squ-sque!”

Piggymaru picked up a number of potentially unfriendly presences.

Three of them. They're still far, but close enough to be attacking the central front—is this one of the Second Order squads? Might be tough to deal with them if all their squads are moving in secret and are spread out across the battlefield like this.

“I'll stay here and crush this guerrilla squadron from the Second Order that are closing in. From the reports, it sounds like this whole front is barely holding on just defending against these guys. Maybe command isn't giving orders fast enough—you take Slei and go help Kil.”

“Understood. Best of luck in battle, my master.”

“Yeah, you too.”

After Seras left, I crouched down low in the brush to conceal myself.

That looks like them.

The men were muscled, their skin carved.

Huh? Who are these guys...?

“...They’re strong.”

“Squ.”

“Let’s go.”

“Sleep.”

The enemies slumped with exhaustion, and while they swayed unconscious, I plunged my sword through their throats. Blood spilled out over the muddy ground, and they collapsed to the dirt. As the blood pulsed from their veins it joined the rainwater and was washed away. I scanned the area, pulling my sword from the final corpse.

“Seems like these were the only ones around...”

“Squee.”

“What’s this?”

It was a leopardman soldier, turning his head from side to side as if looking for something.

Judging from the color of the cloth on his arm—that’s a messenger.

“Looking for me?”

“Wah?! Wh-where did you come from?!” The leopardman messenger looked over his shoulder, then glanced to the left and right, before turning back to me. “Ahem... These carved men we’ve been seeing on the central front... They’re from the Second Order, aren’t they? Even the Band of the Shining Leopard have had problems against them! They appear and vanish like ghosts... And, well... D-did you two kill these men?”

“Guess so, yeah.”

“Squee.”

Piggymaru’s getting included as well—people are finally starting to take

notice of this little slime.

“So, what’s your report?”

“Ah—yes! At present, the central forces are in battle against the Second Order—Geo has killed their order’s captain!”

Good for him.

“But it wasn’t just their captain—each of these Second Order knights are tough in their own right... We had no strength nor time to deal with the scattered squads that still remain. I reported as much to the main camp, and the Leopard Princess gave me the following message: ‘The Leopard King should be presently on his way to deal with those enemies. The Leopard King will observe the situation and then decide whether reinforcements from the Centaur reserves will be necessary...’”

“So you came to check with me?”

“Y-yes...!”

“What about the divine beast?”

“Ah, yes...they have yet to be located. And... The human you mentioned is also unaccounted for.”

“I see.”

So they haven’t found Yasu either.

I felt several presences approaching us.

“You go back. There are Second Order squads remaining in this area. Seems like they don’t fear death, huh? But they aren’t throwing their lives away either. Tough to deal with these kinds of enemies...”

I looked in the direction of the approaching presences.

“I’ll take out as many of these squads as I can. I don’t know if they can sense their allies getting whittled away, but it feels like there are more squads heading in my direction. Trying to surround me. There’s a good number of them closing in.”

They’re here searching for a strong foe. Good luck for me.

“I’ll take down as many of them as I can draw towards me—head back to main camp and report that to them.”

“Y-yes! Good fortune in battle!” The messenger hurried away.

The presences are multiplying. So many of them now, it’s hardly like they’re individual squads at all anymore. Almost like a full order.

I looked up at the sky, let out a long sigh, and then linked myself up with Piggymaru.

“Let’s go.”

“Squee!”

The messenger was in complete shock when he returned.

“Repo—oohh, hey?! Seriously...?”

The area was strewn with Second Order corpses, and I was standing in the center of it all, still wearing the Leopard King disguise and soaked with heavy rain.

“I took out all the squads.”

“Y...yep.”

“How are the other fronts?”

“Ah, yes! On the border between northwestern Ulza and northeastern Mira, a group of what seem to be enemy reinforcements have appeared! They’re much larger than any of the previous orders that our reports have indicated!”

“So they’ve come, eh?”

The Seventh Order... The largest order of them all, led by seven vice-captains. I did hear they have a tendency to hang back in fights—guard the rear. They must have been on standby as reserves.

“I’d really like it if we had more forces around here... But I guess we’ll have to fight with what we’ve got.”

“I-I have a report!”

A harpy soldier? They must have landed somewhere and walked to me.

“Hmm?”

The harpies should all be in the rear—what’s this one doing here?

“I-I have a report on the reinforcements!”

Upon hearing her words, the leopardman soldier turned to the harpy. “It’s fine. I’ve already informed him of the enemy’s reinforcements.”

“No—my report concerns *our* reinforcements!”

“What?”

“Prime Minister Lise has convinced those beyond the door. They have armed themselves for battle! The equipment may be somewhat improvised, but the Country at the End of the World is now well guarded! And since it is not presently under attack, they plan to send half of their number to reinforce our lines!”

Lise has done so much for us in such a short time back there.

“At present, the Band of the Shining Snake led by Amia are en route to the main camp to shore up our defenses!”

“I-incredible... Prime Minister Lise did all this...?” The leopardman messenger looked dumbfounded.

“Hmph.”

Good talker, that spider girl.

The rain had grown lighter, and the sky was dark—but still, the enemy came. I saw the torches of their soldiers floating out there in the blackness.

They aren’t stopping. They’re going to turn this into a night raid. That might put us at an advantage, given the races fighting on our side that can see in the dark. Most of all, the sky is black above, the dark surrounding us—this is my time.

“We only need one more push.”

The enemy has almost poured everything it has into this fight.

“At last—we’re in all-out war.”

The reinforcements that Liselotte sent us were dispatched to each of the three fronts, who began using the terrain to their advantage in launching counter-attacks against the enemy. Loa and his forces struggled to overcome the Eight Order on the eastern flank—until an unexpected ally made his appearance: the forces of Wildly Beautiful Emperor of Mira. The Miran army destroyed the Eighth Order, the emperor himself cutting down their captain in single-combat.

“Fear not,” the Wildly Beautiful Emperor said when confronting Loa. “I have no wish to engage your people in battle. We of Mira are presently in combat with the Thirteen Orders of Alion and are seeking allies in this fight. My Empire of Mira wishes to negotiate with the Country at the End of the World. Please offer your king the message that we entreat him to consider our offer. Our forces have already overtaken and destroyed the Ninth Order, and we hereby intend to fight on this battlefield alongside your nation as allies.”

The forces of Mira then changed course and struck through the flank of the Seven Order as they approached the central front. It was the beginning of the end for that great army—a pincer attack, which found them caught between the forces of Mira and the leopardmen of the Country at the End of the World.

Before he rode away, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor left Loa with these words:

“You may determine friend from foe by the crests you see upon our banners and armor. For our part, it is easy for us to tell human from demi-human...but, in this darkness, I will overlook some mistakes in judgment.”

I’d already explained this situation to Lise and the Four Shining Warriors before the battle had begun.

“Try to avoid mistaking those who may one day be your allies for Alionese knights and injuring or killing them. If you do come across any such men, avoid engaging in combat.”

He had also described to them the Miran crest—and with the details still fresh in their memory, the monster and demi-human soldiers had managed to

distinguish between friend and foe even in the midst of battle.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and his men moved and attacked like phantoms, also sending out orders to release false reports and information far and wide across the battlefield. I caught wind of this and joined in—spreading confusion through the Seventh Order ranks.

“I hear they’ve got a big army of Mirans on our tail!”

“What?! How many?!”

“Look at all them torches, man! That many!”

“Wait, but maybe those are just torches right?!”

“I hear all the other orders have been wiped out! We’re the only ones left!”

“Yeesh! You really believe that?!”

“What, the Sixth Order’s gone down too?! Even *those* guys?!”

“I hear they found Captain Rashid corpse, y’know?!”

“Is it true the captain’s bolted?!”

“Nah, I heard some big black leopardman with blazin’ eyes split ‘im in two!”

“Ain’t we the ones meant to be gettin’ all the best bits?!”

“I heard Michaela wen’ over to their side!”

“What the heck’s goin’ on?! What’s the freakin’ deal out here?! What’s happenin’?!”

“I... It’s over... They gunna kill us all...!!!”

The darkness of the night compounded the Seventh Order knights’ fear, and they fell into uncontrollable panic. Then the Eleventh Order, who had been lurking in wait ever since their retreat at the very start of the battle, made their move. They used their allies’ confusion to their advantage and charged straight towards the main camp of their enemy. They moved under the cover of dark with no torches to light their way, launching a covert assault to punch a hole in

the enemy lines and fearlessly moving in to attack.

On hearing the reports, Seras Ashrain personally struck out from the main camp to meet them in battle, taking a centaur unit with her. She managed to put them down, capturing the divine beast that accompanied them in the process.

His name was Radice—and Seras used her lie detecting abilities to confirm that he was the real divine beast without a shadow of a doubt. He had attempted to join up with the Ninth Order but had settled for the eleventh whom he encountered first.

I, Mimori Touka, was on the western front.

After receiving word of the Fifth Order's appearance, I headed there before the fighting got too intense.

Can't say I'm not worried about Niko. She's not exactly at full strength right now.

"Lady Niko has defeated the captain of the Fifth Order! Sh-she did it! *Sob... Sob...* She really did it... N-Niko!"

When I arrived one of the dragonkin soldiers was already bawling, touched by Niko's return to battle.

Cocoroniko Doran... One of the Four Shining Warriors, and more than worthy of the title. She really was up against the worst kind of enemy, fighting that Sixth Order.

The largest army in the field, the Seventh Order, had fallen into total disarray and were beating a pathetic retreat across the battlefield. Only two of their seven captains remained alive—both captives of the Miran army.

On that day... The Thirteen Orders of Alion, pride of the Goddess's forces, were completely defeated at the hands of the alliance of the Empire of Mira and Country at the End of the World.

At 01:09, the Thirteen Orders of Alion were annihilated.

After the battle, I returned to our main camp.

Reports of our victory had reached the silver door and those within the Country at the End of the World. Seras, Kil, and Amia were standing over a map spread out on a table. There was no longer any danger that the main camp might be discovered, so the area was well lit.

“It seems the enemy’s remaining forces have completely lost the will to fight,” Seras reported, confirming the current situation for us once more. “Those that live are in retreat—some of the Second Order knights appeared willing to fight to the last man, but Sir Geo and his Band of the Shining Leopard took care of them. They outnumbered the enemy and easily overwhelmed them.”

“How are the other fronts doing?” asked Amia.

“Lady Niko on the western flank is coming this way, bringing all the soldiers who’ve surrendered with her. Sir Loa’s on his way here from the east as well.”

Kil looked down at the map before her and folded her arms.

“Going to have Geo stay on the front lines for now, are we?”

“Yes. It was his idea, and well... He believes we should still be cautious of the Miran forces. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s army...” Seras glanced at me before continuing. “It appears they are chasing down the retreating Alion soldiers. They call it killing those that do not surrender, it seems. But due to the difficulty of managing the captured soldiers, they wish to leave them in our care for the time being... How should we proceed?”

Seras asked the question to everyone present, but Kil and Amia’s eyes turned in my direction.

“I don’t think I get to decide that. It’s up to King Zect or Lise how they treat their prisoners.”

“Yep, but I wanna hear what you think too,” said Amia, fidgeting.

...I still don’t have a good grip on who this Lamia really is.

“It’s not like they need us to take all these prisoners right away, is it? Just send them back a reply saying you’ll *take the appropriate steps*, and *consider their proposal*—that’ll do for now.”

Magic words that let us play the situation however it works best for us.

“Well... If they start trying to push the issue, it gives us one more card to use in negotiations I suppose as well.”

“I see~. The Fly Guy’s a real diplomatic sort, eh?”

“I know you aren’t used to commanding large-scale battles... You did well to make it all the way to the end of this fight, Kil.”

“Right? What else d’ya expect from a centaur like me? Or like, I’d wanna say that—but it really was all thanks to Miss Seras. She taught me so much new stuff!”

“I-I’m honored to have been of service...”

“Hey, you don’t gotta get modest now~! Man, you’re so cute, I could just eat you up!” Kil placed her hands on Seras’s shoulders.

“Oh, Lady K-Kil—!”

Seems like those two have gotten closer—I guess they have spent a lot of time together here at main camp.

“Can’t forget you did a great job in the battle too, can we?” said Amia, coming over to stand by my side.

“Using your country’s soldiers. I hardly have any right to brag about that... But thanks for the words of encouragement.”

“Thank you for what you did for Niko. I appreciate it,” said Amia, her tone changing completely.

“Niko’s strong. She even went on to return to the front lines and defeat one of the enemy’s captains.”

“Heheh. ♪ She’s one of the Four Shining Warriors, after all, pride of the nation!”

“You are too, right?”

“I hardly did a thing though! But that’s just because you sent me to the rear guard. I’m not apologizing for nothin’!”

...Why would she need to apologize?

Just then, a messenger rushed toward us. “Lord Dolis!”

The news seemed urgent.

The divine beast has already been captured—what else could there be?

“Th-the human has been located!”

Yasu.

Seras looked over at me.

The messenger then dropped to his knees, as if reporting some great failure.

“B-but... My deepest apologies! Your orders were to avoid approaching the human if possible, but... H-his torso was sticking out of a sack, and th-the dragonkin soldier who found him...s-seeing his terrible injuries...they gave him food and water...”

The messenger swallowed.

“I-I’m very sorry th-that the soldier in question thought to take such action! B-but...on seeing his injuries, I... They were too much to ignore...”

From what Johndoe told me, I have a good idea of the state he’s in. Not to mention the soldier who found Yasu was a dragonkin... After their experience with the Sixth Order, I can hardly blame them for taking pity on Yasu.

“How is he? Can he talk?”

“Yes... He responds with some noises when spoken to. There is some quiet muttering as well... He thanked the ones who helped him...”

“All right. Can he be moved?”

“I think so, yes.”

I pointed to a spot on the map.

“Take him here for me, then, will you?”

“U-understood.”

“If a messenger comes from the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, let me know,” I said, then gave the man several more orders.

The rest of this I can leave up to the people of the Country at the End of the World. Sounds like Lise’s coming out to the main camp soon, she’ll get a handle

on all this in no time.

Seras and I mounted Sleï—and we left to head towards Yasu's location. Incidentally, I was still dressed as the Leopard King.

"This man, he... To you, he's..."

"Just another human, an other-worlder."

"What has happened to the other heroes, I wonder—those that remained at the Goddess's side."

"That Foul Goddess would discard them in an instant I bet. She doesn't seem the kind to hesitate when she disposes of people."

According to Johndoe, Yasu was ordered to invite me to join her and to kill me if I refused. But the Goddess also told Johndoe that he could kill Yasu if it seemed he wouldn't be of any use. Looks like Yasu must've done something to upset the Sixth Order knights then.

"My master."

"Yeah, I see it."

Several dragonkin soldiers up ahead—this looks like the place.

Seras and I dismounted as we arrived.

"...This is terrible," said Seras as soon as she laid eyes on Yasu. She placed a hand to her mouth, but no more words came out—she was speechless. I asked the dragonkin soldiers for an explanation of the situation, and with some difficulty, one of them gave me a report.

"...He lost consciousness a few minutes ago. I don't believe his life is in danger. It might be that the human was so relieved that he passed out."

"Did he say anything before he went?"

The dragonkin soldier answered, giving much the same information I'd heard from the messenger before I came.

There's one thing that bothers me though.

"He named himself a Hero from Another World right before he fainted," said the dragonkin, looking down on Yasu with disbelief still in his eyes.

Must be the first time this soldier has met a hero—knowingly, at least. So... Yasu revealed that he was a hero to these people.

“The report was right... He’s in a bad way.”

Yasu’s condition was, in a word, atrocious. He looked like a ragdoll.

“The fingers on this hand, well... You can see...” explained the dragonkin who had treated him, her voice filled with regret. “Three have been severed. The nails on his hands and feet have all been ripped off... His right ear can’t be reattached... The tendons on this leg have been completely shredded. Unfortunately, I... I don’t think this can be treated. The flesh on his body has just been cut away in so many places. Some areas can be saved, but...”

The dragonkin paused for a moment, her face twisted up in anguish.

“These small injuries around his right eye...” It looked as if he had been pricked multiple times with a needle in the surrounding area. “His eyesight remains, however... This is incredibly unsettling, but...”

Must’ve been to drive him to despair... Threatening to blind him by stabbing out his eye.

“The treatment, huh?”

“Y-yes... The way his wounds have been treated to prevent blood loss—it’s almost perfect. Even before we came to help, his injuries were so well tended to...”

The dragonkin soldier looked down, her expression filled with melancholy.

“...Ah!” she suddenly looked up at me. “Do you think this treatment was—”

“Yeah. Likely the work of the Sixth Order—the ones who did it to him in the first place.”

“B-but why...?” The dragonkin soldier seemed to struggle to understand this.

I guess it would be hard for the people of this country to comprehend. They hurt him—but stopped the bleeding to enjoy him longer. Their aim wasn’t to kill Yasu but to break his mind, over and over again. This treatment was sadism, not healing.

Yasu was always slim, but now he looked frail. And the smell—it was clear what kind of abuse he received at their hands.

“Tch.”

That Sixth Order—their predilections were terrible, through and through.

“Oh, and this piece of equipment over here...”

The dragonkin soldier picked it up for me to see. It looked like a kind of iron restraint, shaped to fit on the lower jaw of the face.

“The human could not speak until we removed this from him...”

“I see.”

Couldn't speak—couldn't say the names of any of his skills either then, meaning he couldn't activate them. Those knights didn't have to fear any of Yasu's abilities so long as they had him wearing this. Taking the voice away from a hero basically disables their skills after all. The reason they didn't just take his whole throat—that must have been for their own enjoyment as well.

“Ahem, Leopard King... Before he fainted, It...it was too much seeing him like that, and I gave him something to drink and some simple food mixed with water... I-I'm so sorry! It was reckless of me. I did not know if this human was friend or foe, yet I...”

I raised my hand to silence her.

“I've already been told of that. Don't let it bother you. If he's a Hero from Another World, sworn to the Goddess—then there are some things I'd like to ask him anyway... And I can't ask anything if he's dead.”

“Then shall we capture him and bring him beyond the door for the time being?” asked Seras, her expression still grave.

“Yeah. Carry him to the Country at the End of the World—Sleep.”

I sent Yasu to sleep—eliminating the possibility that he might wake up while he was being moved. I placed a hand to the metal restraint the soldier had given me.

“Fit him with this as well—doing it after you've gotten him inside is fine.”

“You’d...like us to refit him with this device?”

“Yeah.”

“U-understood...”

This must sound cruel to her... Reattaching that thing to Yasu when it’s already caused him so much suffering. But we don’t know what he might do. He might suddenly use one of his skills, start rampaging around. That would cost lives in the Country at the End of the World—I want to eliminate that risk as much as possible.

“I heard that before he lost consciousness, he thanked you.”

“Ah, yes... When I offered water, his voice was just a feeble whisper... But he said ‘thank you’ and ‘sorry,’ yes.”

“...”

“You’re an E-Class, bottom of the heap. I’m an A-Class. Show some respect.”

“Just go die already, Mimori! Get out of my sight!”

“All right, then. Give it your best shot, I guess—you don’t have long to live, trash hero.”

The Yasu Tomohiro that rejected me in the old world—the same one who watched me being disposed of in this one. I just can’t see the connection between that Yasu and one sprawled out on the ground here before me—it’s like he’s already gone.

Tired, exhausted... He’s suffered enough.

That’s all I see before me now.

The way his character transformed before I was sent to the Ruins of Disposal shocked me. It’s not like I have no feelings about the way he acted toward me then. But looking at Yasu now—I can hardly say this “serves him right.” I have no desire to hurt him any more either...

All I could think of in that moment was how terribly savage what had happened to Yasu was.

I told the dragonkin soldier how long it would take for Sleep to wear off.

My skills can't be used multiple times on the same target right away, but as with Slow I can use Sleep again on Yasu after a fairly long cooldown. Well, I can use other skills in quick succession though:

Paralyze → Sleep → Paralyze

These kinds of trick combos let me semi-permanently disable a target.

“When I’ve got the time, I’d like to come and talk to this hero. If it looks like he’s going to try and attack me, I can use my cursed magic to restrain him.”

I’ll bring Seras with me too. If Yasu was taken out by Johndoe—he can’t be as hard to handle as that guy was. Even if he tries a surprise attack, Seras and I should be able to deal with it together.

I watched as Yasu was carried away on a stretcher made of cloth and branches.

“But with the way he is now... Maybe we don’t even need those precautions.”

“L-Leopard King!” After Yasu left, a centaur came galloping toward us.

“A messenger, eh?”

I did figure this was coming...

“A message has arrived from the Wildly Beautiful Emperor!”

Here it is.

“I-I will deliver it as instructed! A Miran envoy told me...” The centaur proceeded to read her message.

I’m sure after this long battle, the forces of your great nation are tired and busy with addressing the casualties of war. As such, I understand it might be difficult for you to make an immediate decision on how to approach the relationship between our two countries at this present stage. I wish to allow you until nightfall to make your decision. I believe that meeting somewhere out in the open will be best for our first discussion. I recommend the area located exactly between our two camps, but I leave the precise location to your

discretion. As my forces eliminate the remnants of the Thirteen Orders of Alion, we will also be making camp and treating our wounded in the area I have indicated to your messenger. If you do not answer us within the deadline I have stipulated, I intend on withdrawing my forces from this land. Though even if it comes to this, know that my will to engage in peaceful negotiations with your people still remains.”

When the centaur had finished, she looked at us expectantly for a response. Seras was the first to break the silence.

“I believe this is promising.”

“If we consider the Wildly Beautiful Emperor only wanted a divine beast so he could negotiate with the Country at the End of the World in the first place, the concessions make sense. Mira has already declared war on Alion, and I hear Ulza is sending troops against them. It’s likely he wants to ally with this nation, using their military strength in the Miran war against Alion.”

Then there’s the Forbidden Words Clan—it’s possible he’s after their forbidden magic. If his country is going up against Alion, that means facing down that Foul Goddess after all. If he knows the Forbidden Words Clan are a trump card against the divine, then it would make perfect sense for him to want them on his side.

“I-in addition...” the messenger said. “The Wildly Beautiful Emperor also asked for the Lord of the Flies, Belzegea, to attend...”

Seras was shocked and turned toward me. The messenger looked at me too, as if waiting for a reaction.

“W-well... It appears he learned of you during the battle, Lord of the Flies. His Miran scouts reported the soldiers of our Country at the End of the World speaking your name.”

Not all of them were able to switch to using the pseudonym then, eh? Someone was bound to slip up. Especially in an intense battle like the one we just had, can’t blame anyone for getting distracted by other matters.

“What have Kil and Lise said about Mira’s proposal?” I asked the messenger.

“Lady Kil wishes to hear your opinion... And the Prime Minister suggested that

the Lord of the Flies and Lady Seras should be present to discuss the decision.”

I don't think the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is likely to use this opportunity to ambush us...

“In any case, the soldiers are tired from battle and need to rest. Even on the off-chance we do have to fight Mira.”

Most of all, this is something for the Country at the End of the World to decide—not me. But if they're asking for advice, I should answer.

“All right. Leave the defensive lines up—we're going back beyond the door.”

We returned to the Country at the End of the World, with some of our forces in tow. We left defensive lines out in the field.

We've captured the enemy divine beast, and could retreat beyond the door and shut ourselves in if we wanted. But there's a chance Mira might send out another messenger.

The forces we left outside were the Band of the Shining Snake and a squad of monsters, close enough to the door that they could still quickly retreat inside. In addition, Gratrah and the king's personal guards were sent out to join them. As none of them had seen any battle on the front lines—all were fresh and ready for combat.

“I'm surprised Gratrah was so quick to agree, though. I expected she wouldn't want to leave the king's side,” I said to Amia, who we met just outside the door. I had exchanged a few words with Gratrah earlier, and it seemed that there was something different about her. Something a little more flexible in her attitude, perhaps.

“Maybe that's Lise's reasoning working its magic?” suggested Amia. “Well, I suppose she might be angry that the battle to determine the fate of our nation was left up to other soldiers. The Band of the Shining Snake hardly did anything in the battle either. We've gotta do what we can now to make up for it, yeah.”

As the squad of monster soldiers approached us on the road, I saw armed kobolds among them. They bowed to us as we rode past.

“Yeah, they’re grateful to you, Lord of the Flies. People beyond the door are saying you’re the reason we won. Might even be true.”

“Maybe that’s just because the opportunity presented itself.”

“You’re the one that defeated the Sixth Order. Gratrah respects you for that. Niko can’t stop complimenting you, if you can believe it. I sure can’t... What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing.”

Now that they’re on our side, these kobolds actually look kinda cute. The way these little guys waddle around... Brings a smile to my face.

“You’ve got that meeting soon as we get back right? Jeez, you don’t get a moment’s rest.”

“Just a little further, that’s all. Easier now I can see that the finish line’s so much closer.”

“Least you stay positive. Yeah.”

“Right, then. Look after the defenses, will you?”

“Yep!”

The other three armies were already back inside, so we entered through the silver door once more to join them.

“Master, meow!” Nyaki immediately ran right towards us. “Miss Seras... And Piggymaru too! Sleii! You’re all safe, right?! Meoww~! You’re all okay! Nyaki’s so glad!”

“Good job sneaking Geo and the others outside... You did well.”

“Nyaki did her best to make sure Master’s plan succeeded! And... Nyaki is... Nyaki’s a member of the Lord of the Flies Brigade too... Meow?” She fidgeted and looked up at me questioningly.

“Of course you are.”

Her ears pricked up, and her face was beaming with a smile. “Meow-ow! Yes!”

“Heheh... You’re already a full-fledged member of the team, Lady Nyaki.”

“Thank you, Miss Seras!”

“Squee-♪”

“Pakyu~h!”

“Piggymaru and Sleil are Nyaki’s seniors! Nyaki wants to be like you two~!”

“Seeing Nyaki again makes me feel so calm,” I said to Seras.

“I feel the same way,” she said, chuckling with a smile.

“Ahem—Lord Belzegea, I am pleased to see you alive and well...along with the members of the Lord of the Flies Brigade.”

“Ah—” Seras looked straight ahead, to see Munin standing there with both hands folded over her stomach. “You must be Seras? I believe this is the first time we have had the pleasure of speaking.”

“Yes. My apologies... I have been so busy of late, I had no real time for a formal greeting.” Seras straightened her back and turned neatly to face towards her. “My name is Seras Ashrain, vice-captain of the Lord of the Flies Brigade and my master’s knight. I look forward to working with you, Lady Munin.”

“As do I. Thank you for your courtesy.” Munin smiled widely and bowed her head—then raising it, with a hand placed over her chest. “My name is Munin, chief of the Kurosaga Clan. I have heard the rumors that speak of you, Seras ... And yet...”

“Eh?”

“Are all High Elves quite so attractive?”

“Umm...?”

“You’re so beautiful, I may just fall for you...”

Doesn’t seem like this is flattery; she really is head over heels for Seras. She’s having trouble keeping it together.

Munin sighed, hot breath escaping her lips. “You’re practically a work of art...”

“Eh? N-no, well... I... B-but you are so beautiful yourself, Lady Munin...”

“My, my, come now? I must be quite the old lady from your perspective?”

Though I'm happy to accept the flattery nonetheless. ♪"

High elves barely change their appearance at all with age, so it's also possible Seras is older than Munin. Well, though knowing Seras's real age, it does seem obvious that Munin's older.

Seras was flustered, waving her hands in front of her face.

"I-I'm not trying to flatter you. I truly do think you are a beautiful woman. The princess always did complain of how my speaking of beauty could come across poorly. But I t-truly was just giving my honest opinion!"

"*Ho ho*, thank you, Seras. ♪ You're an honest one, aren't you? I'm relieved to find you're so easy to talk to."



“You truly are beautiful, Munin-san,” I said, jumping into the conversation. “Even I am capable of seeing that.”

“My, my, Belzegea... You need not be quite so formal—you can treat me the same as everyone else, you know? In fact...” Munin placed a hand to her cheek and gave a melancholy sigh. “When I’m the only one you treat like this...it makes me feel I’m not one of you, and it makes me a little sad.”

The chief of the Kurosaga Clan was giving off a distinct sense of longing.

“Am I being treated specially because I’m older, perhaps? Am I an outcast?”

Has she always been like this?

“Well, if you insist, Munin-san.”

“Just Munin will do. Or simply call me ‘you’ if my first name is too embarrassing for you. ♪ Y-yes. I might not mind being addressed a little more casually by a younger male. ♪ So please...?”

“Well then... If *you* insist.”

“For a moment there, you were thinking I’m going to be a *pain* to deal with, weren’t you?”

“You’re half right...”

“Well. ♪ Then, let’s get to know each other slowly. One step at a time, shall we?”

...Ah, I get it now. I feel like I understand why I’m having trouble dealing with Munin.

She reminds me of...her. Of my foster mother.

I remember thinking Seras was like my foster mother once... But back then I knew their personalities were different, and I was right. But Munin... Even her personality reminds me of my foster mother. The way she approaches you, gets in close and throws you off balance. They’re really similar.

“In any case...” The atmosphere around Munin changed, and she shifted to sit up neatly when addressing us. She looked almost like the Virgin Mary, her smile filled with compassion and love. “Thank you ever so much for your hard work.

Your actions today saved lives—not just those of the Kurosaga but all the citizens of this nation.”

She lowered her head.

“Thank you—truly.”

This reminds me of her, too. She isn't just playful and casual all of the time... When she needs to, she can be really sincere. They really are similar.

“The rest of you as well, thank you so much for your actions on this day. As a representative of the Kurosaga, I humbly thank you, once again.”

She went on to bow deeply to Seras and Slei in turn, and Seras smiled back at her.

“If what I have done today has played some small part in saving your people, then it gives meaning to the battles I have overcome. Thank you for your encouragement.”

Seras bowed once—it looked as if Munin’s words had had a deep impression on her.

Seras seems to like her too... I think the two of them are going to be able to get along.

“Lord Belzegea!”

It was a leopardman messenger—even *in here, they can't help themselves!*

“The preparations for the meeting are complete. Prime Minister Liselotte has asked for you and Seras Ashrain to attend once you are ready to do so.”

“All right.”

So much for getting some rest.

“I’ll be right there.”

“Now then... Any objections to our current plans for negotiation with the Empire of Mira?” asked Kil, looking at me. She was chair for the meeting that was taking place. In attendance was King Zect, Lise, Geo, Niko, Kil, Seras, and me—all seven of us sitting around the meeting room table.

Loa, the hound of hell from the eastern flank who could speak the human tongue, was absent. He belonged to the Band of the Shining Dragon, apparently. Niko, the head of his band, would tell him what happened afterward.

“There seem to be no objections. I guess it’s decided!”

The meeting went more smoothly than I’d expected, in stark contrast to the one that took place before the battle. Lise and King Zect in particular had changed significantly—the latter had looked terribly despondent when the meeting began.

“I was wrong. I simply did not want to do battle with the humans that were approaching our country. I unconsciously favored the only choice that would avoid conflict, but I was only averting my eyes from reality. No matter how long I may live, I will always regret this decision... Lord of the Flies, please forgive this foolish king.”

During the remainder of the meeting King Zect barely spoke at all—nor did Lise.

“Lise, does this sound okay?” Kil asked.

Lise’s face was well bandaged, and the swelling had receded to where it was no longer noticeable.

“I made the wrong decision as well. I wonder if I truly have a right to speak on the matter?”

“I’m not sure being wrong about something once should silence someone forever,” I said. Lise looked up from the table at me, and the others turned in my direction as well. “Objectively speaking, you’re a capable person. You did well to deliver us reinforcements at the end of the battle. It was your skills that made that happen. Maybe your narrow view of things and your stubbornness have been problems... But you’ve gotten more flexible with your decision making now, haven’t you? I’m counting on you, at the very least.”

“While I’m happy to hear you say that... Still, I...” She trailed off.

I leaned back in my chair and folded my arms. “Have Kil handle matters of war for the time being. Liselotte Onik will cooperate with the rest of the Seven

Lights and respect their opinions, as she continues to focus on her work as prime minister—domestic and foreign affairs. How does that sound? Any objections?”

Geo snorted at the others’ silence.

“Don’t seem like there are.”

King Zect nodded his approval as well. “I think that is for the best. In truth, I would like to relinquish my throne to you, Lord of the Flies...”

“You’re better as king of this country than I’d ever be. Setting aside this mistake with the Alion invasion, I’ve never heard a bad word spoken about you from any of your subjects. You also were accommodating of my request to meet with Kurosaga before the battle began. You did not try to ruthlessly remove those who disagreed with you. You even apologized earlier in this meeting. You’re a king who’s capable of that—and that’s why I think you’re best for the job. Just my personal opinion, of course.”

“Thank you for your kind words, Lord of the Flies. I will devote myself fully to this position in the future, following your example.”

“I agree with the Lord of the Flies as well,” said Niko. “I was one of those who cast her vote with the prime minister at first, I bear some responsibility for that mistake in judgment. If any are to be blamed for this incident—it should be not only the prime minister and his majesty, but myself too.”

“You only voted out of a sense of obligation—for me...” began Lise.

“Even so. In the end, we were given a chance to take back our mistake—with the help of the Lord of the Flies sitting over there. Thanks to him, now we have the opportunity to recover. That’s why I—the prime minister, and his majesty too—I think we should recover. Yes, the Lord of the Flies is a reliable man. I have to admit that, and I-I’m not embarrassed about this, you know?!”

“Nobody said you were,” Geo jumped in.

Amia said Niko was becoming a lot more flexible where I was concerned.

Niko cleared her throat, trying to get back on track.

“That said, my loyalty to the prime minister and to his majesty the king

remains entirely unshaken. Our dragonkin clan were saved by you—this much will never change.”

“Niko...” Lise’s expression looked filled with emotion.

“In any case, that’s that, then,” I said, confirming the decision had been made.

“For now we’ll work on setting up negotiations with Mira. When it comes time, Lise, me, Seras, the Band of the Shining Leopard, and the Band of the Shining Dragon should attend. And we’ll try to form an alliance with Mira. If the negotiations are successful, we might be able to ask them for support in resolving your food shortages, provided such a request doesn’t open the nation up for exploitation. This country will provide reinforcements to the Miran army when needed, but the chain of command should remain in demi-human hands.”

I paused before continuing.

“We’ll suggest to Mira that they handle our prisoners of war moving forward, including those they’ve recently handed over to us. In light of this nation’s food shortages, it will be difficult to maintain and properly care for a significant prisoner population. You think Mira is likely to accept this, right, Seras?”

I turned to look at Seras who was standing behind me.

“Yes. Mira holds large swathes of good fertile land on the continent and are unlikely to suffer from famine or food shortages.”

“They even export to the other nations, right?”

“Yes.”

“This Mira place sounds pretty rich, eh?”

“They also have considerable mineral resources from the mines in their western mountain ranges. They have one of the most productive fishing industries of all the nations, second only to the Bakoss Empire. As for their politics... Since Emperor Zine ascended the throne, their nation’s strength has increased greatly, and his popularity among his people has soared. Their abundance of resources and supporting citizens aside, the Band of the Sun is very strong. Even the Princess of Neah acknowledged Mira’s success—especially

that of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and his two older brothers.”

The princess, eh?

“In any case, with the state of their nation as it stands, I believe we can hope that these negotiations could lead to a permanent solution to our food shortages.”

“Mira is also situated right next to the Country at the End of the World. There’s no danger that some foreign power could separate us from their trade supply lines.”

“What do we do if negotiations break down?” asked Geo.

“Might be a good idea to temporarily close the silver door and lock ourselves in if that happens. Even if we are going to fight with Mira, we need time for our troops to receive treatment and rest. Luckily, we’ve got the divine beast Radice in here—would’ve been dicey if he fell into enemy hands. Nyaki’s here too, of course. So long as we keep that door closed, they can’t touch us.”

Even that Foul Goddess relied on her divine beast to get inside—she can’t just open this place whenever she likes.

“Well... I do think we’re going to get a deal,” I muttered, loud enough that some of those present might just hear.

If the Wildly Beautiful Emperor really is after the Forbidden Words Clan—if he wants their forbidden magic—that means he’s serious about going up against the Goddess. Now they’ve rebelled against Alion, Mira can’t step back from this. No matter how powerful their armies are, and how worn out the other nations might be from their recent fight against the Demon King’s invasion, is Mira really capable of single-handedly taking on the whole of the Sacred Alliance?

Even from a purely military perspective, they should be enthusiastic about forming an alliance with the Country at the End of the World. Meaning we’ve got a surprising number of cards in our own hand to draw concessions out from Mira in these negotiations.

...The Wildly Beautiful Emperor of Mira, eh.

Apparently he isn’t all that different in age from me. A young emperor—one

who pushed aside the first and second in line to ascend to the throne. Not to mention those he supplanted are now serving under him. I want to know what kind of person he is.

With our course decided, the meeting ended and we all dispersed. The Seven Lights proceeded to make their way out of the meeting room.

“Ahem, Belzegea? Do you have a moment?” Liselotte Onik stopped me as I made to leave. She was lightly folding her arms and averting her eyes from mine. “N-now that the meeting is over, do you have...some time?”

“There’s still some leeway left until the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s deadline. I guess I can make time, sure.”

“Th-then will you come with me...t-to my room?”

“Your room?”

“W-well... If you can’t, then that’s fine too. It’s not all that important...”

Sounds like she’s got something to say... Not about this country—something more personal.

“All right—Seras, go on ahead.”

“Understood. I will return first, then.” Seras turned and gave me a brief bow.

And so, I headed to Lise’s room in the castle.

“You haven’t really decorated much in here, huh?”

Looks more like an office than a room in someone’s house. At least it’s spacious enough.... And she is the prime minister, after all.

The office wasn’t extravagant at all. The tones on the walls were calm and fit together well. There were some spare furnishings. Against one wall I saw a simple kitchen area and a door that looked to lead to a bathroom.

Seems like she could do almost anything with the place she’s got here. She’s got an important position to fulfill though, I suppose she needs all the space she can get. There’s also one more door over there against the far wall.

“Hm? Ah, that’s my bedroom... It’s a little messy at present, so I’d rather not

invite you in there if you don't mind."

Lise directed me to a long sofa, and I sat. There was a long table in front of me that could seat eight people.

She might have meetings with other members of the Onik clan in here, I suppose.

I could see a number of other chairs for members of the other races stacked up against the wall—Lise had brought out the human-sized sofa ahead of time. She poured me some water in a silver cup and placed it before me with a thud.

"For you!"

"Sorry for the trouble."

Lise snorted, as if brushing off my comment—but it was clear her cheeks had flushed a little red.

Unlike Seras, this arachne really lets her emotions show on her face, huh?

"Listen, okay?! Drink that and wait for a while. I want you to sit there quietly and wait. Is that understood?!"

She wagged her index finger at me, before scuttling over to the kitchen. I looked on as she hurriedly busied herself over there, watching her light a small fire. Before long—a delightful smell came drifting over in my direction.

"I'm sorry Belzegea, if you could wait...just a little longer."

"Sure, you don't need to rush."

She's really putting her back into that cooking... Doesn't look like she's used to it. Maybe she doesn't do a lot of it.

I made myself comfortable as I waited, taking off my mask to drink the water Lise had given me.

"Eh?"

This is toinoa water...but it tastes a little different from the other stuff. Sweeter, maybe?

"That's my own handmade blend of toinoa water... I drink it whenever I get tired, and—ow, that's hot!"

“You okay?”

“I-I’m quite all right! How rude of you to ask!”

“At least get something cold to put on it.”

“I-I know that! Oh~... Th-thank you for your concern.”

“ ...”

So she called me here to serve me food, then...?

Soon she turned around, bringing a wooden plate from the kitchen in her hands.

“Wh-! Wh-why have you taken off your mask?!”

“I can’t exactly drink with it on... Or eat anything that’s on that plate you’re holding for that matter.”

She froze in place with the plate in hand. Her back had been turned to me the whole time she was cooking, so it had taken her until that moment to notice.

“I-is that your real face?”

“Does it look like a disguise? Anyway, you always knew I was a human, right? What’s there to be surprised about?”

But well, hey. I guess I am always wearing a full-face mask in front of her, so I can’t blame her for being a little shocked.

“I know this is a country of demi-humans and monsters, so some of you might be wary of humans. I didn’t want to alarm anyone.”

In the fight out there, I was hiding my appearance to conceal my true identity. I didn’t want the Alion forces getting a good look at my face. But right now, it’s just me and Lise in here.

“But hey, for personal reasons I still want to keep my face hidden as much as I can. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell people what I look like.”

“Yes, I understand. I’m sure you have your reasons... I will not pry.”

“Thanks.”

“Hmm.” Lise looked at me with half-opened eyes—she appeared a little

sheepish.

“Hmm?”

“S-so this is what you look like. Your face is different than I expected.”

“Disappointed?”

“Do I really need to respond to that?! Forget about this. Eat!”

“You’re the one that brought this up in the first place...”

“I’m sorry, okay?! I-in any case, the food...!” Lise was flustered but still managed to set the plate down gently on the table.

She really is easy to read, this arachne. She has this habit of raising her two front legs and fidgeting whenever she gets embarrassed. Maybe arachne legs are just more expressive than human ones? Like cat’s tails, I suppose.

This food does smell good.

“This... It’s my way of apologizing and saying thanks. I don’t know what to do at times like these. All I could think of was to serve you something. I mean, you weren’t able to eat properly when you were out there fighting. If you’re hungry, you should go right ahead and eat your fill!”

Won’t get any arguments from me!

“E-eat up before it gets cold! Wh-what’s the matter with you?”

I don’t know if she’s tired, flustered, or excited, but she’s all over the place right now...

“This smells good,” I said as the appetizing and savory smell wafted up towards me.

These kind of look like German fries... But kind of smooshed up, in a bad way. I think maybe she pre-boiled the potatoes, but maybe a little too long?

Some of them have lost their shape completely. There are some vegetables in here too, but it almost looks like they’ve been cut up at random. She does seem to have used just the right amount of these things that look like herbs, though.

“Th-this is all I could manage in terms of presentation! ...Y-you don’t have to force yourself to eat it if you don’t want to...”

...Most of all, there's this bright red sauce she's put all over the dish. Looks like that stuff could be really spicy...



But hey, might as well see how it tastes.

Munch.

Hey, this stuff...

“It’s pretty good.”

“Really—?! I-I did tell you I’m the chief of the Onik Clan! ...Does it really taste good?”

“Better than it looks, sure.”

“If it fills you up, what does it matter how it looks...?”

“Guess you’re right.”

I really am hungry, that much is for sure. The sauce on these potatoes isn’t bad... Seems like it’d go fine with baked potatoes as well.

“I know it might not look great, but the ingredients in this sauce have a calming effect. It’s especially good at making sure thinkers get a good night’s rest. But the necessary items are quite rare, so I can’t often make large batches. It wouldn’t do for it to be in demand.”

So Lise’s even considerate with what she’s choosing to cook for me. Maybe this over-boiling was to make it easier to digest.

Once I finished eating, Lise sat down in the opposite chair.

“Ahem... I’m really sorry about what happened.”

I took a swig of tona water.

“You’ve already apologized.”

“I wanted to do it again, properly... And well, also to thank you.” She straightened her back and bowed her head. “Thank you very much. Your support and advice have saved this country. I thank you as prime minister of the Country at the End of the World, and also personally, as Liselotte Onik.”

I see. So this is what she wanted to say—one on one. She’s a real serious one.

“The swelling on your face.”

“Eh?”

“It’s gotten a lot better.”

“Y-yes...” Lise rubbed her cheek. “When I had my injuries seen to, I was told they weren’t as bad as they looked... One of the centaurs of the Kil Clan also assisted me with their healing magic. I was given medicine to rub in and a little concealer.”

Lise gave a bitter smile.

All that must make her recovery way faster than normal. Michaela did say he wanted to send Lise to a brothel—it’s possible he was holding back a little. But that fear that Lise felt was real... Maybe it’s not the physical pain but the - emotional pain that’s scarred her most deeply of all.

“Those reinforcements you sent out towards the end of the battle... You did really well to get them to us. They made our fight against the Seventh Order much easier to handle.”

“Ah, yes... I-I thought that having more of our soldiers in the field would reduce losses.”

“When all’s said and done—you can be really persuasive, huh? I knew you could do it.”

Lise looked down at the table with a self-deprecating smile. “All I did was ask them, as sincerely as I could. I admitted my own mistakes and just asked them to help...to lend their strength to those fighting outside. Those reinforcements—what they won was not my victory. It was theirs. Every last one of them trusted in me in that moment.”

She closed her eyes and clenched both her fists, held tightly over her stomach.

“I realized it then. That I...I’ve only been able to be a ‘fine prime minister’ of this country because of the good hearts of all the citizens that live here. It was never that I was good at my job, just... Everybody trusted me; that’s why I was under the mistaken impression I could do anything on my own...”

She closed her eyes tight.

“...Why did you do it?” Lise asked out of nowhere.

“What?”

“The negotiations with Mira. I didn’t say anything at the meeting, but why did you choose me to represent our nation? Surely King Zect or Kil would be better...”

“You said this was everyone’s victory, right?”

“Y-yes...”

“Then *everyone* means you too—you’re a part of this,” I said. “You’re right. The reinforcements that agreed to come out and help us fight really do have good hearts. But the one who decided to send them to us was none other than you—Liselotte Onik. That was your contribution, nobody else’s. And it was a good decision. I’m grateful you made it. I want you to remember that.”

Lise’s mouth contorted—she looked like she was desperately holding back from crying. “Wh-why... Why?!”

“...”

“The things I said about you! I denounced you publicly! I said such cruel things! And then everything I thought was wrong! My mistakes put everyone in danger! S-so why?! Why are you...” She couldn’t hold back the tears any longer. “Why are you being so nice to me?!”

“That’s simple.”

“...”

“You never made me angry, Liselotte Onik.”

Not like the Sixth Order did.

“In some ways I can’t view people objectively. Are the things they do just or ethical? ...I can’t make those decisions. What matters to me is whether they upset me or not—whether they make me angry. That’s everything.”

“I didn’t find you unpleasant to deal with. That’s why I’m kind to you and why I don’t want to exclude you. That’s about it.”

She’s not like those freakin’ awful real parents of mine, or that Foul Goddess. Nor the countless irredeemable scumbags I’ve encountered in this world.

Compared to them, she's barely done anything wrong.

To me, Lise's different. That's the only reason I need.

"I mean you *used* to be surprisingly closed-minded... Obstinate and aggressive and conceited. And you'd say things to hurt people like it was nothing at all—it *was* pretty mean of you," I said jokingly.

Lise shrank.

"...I'm sorry, okay?"

"But you're not like that anymore, right?"

"..."

"You're seeing things with more perspective now... You're more flexible listening to other people's opinions, and you aren't aggressive for no reason. You're still a bit conceited—but well, that's who you are. You seem more considerate to others as well now."

"Is that so? I wonder..."

"Yeah. Seems like your efforts are paying off."

"But I'm still conceited?"

"That's fine."

"You don't deny it, then..."

"No point in flattering you, is there?"

"...Eh~." Lise rubbed her two front legs together. "Then... Y-you really meant all those things you just said?"

"Seems like you'd be used to praise, prime minister."

"B-be quiet, you! It matters who the praise is coming from!"

"So it's different when it's me?"

"Th—! Misunderstand what I'm saying!"

"?"

"?"

“That came out wrong...” Lise began in a whisper, before catching herself and starting again. “D-don’t misunderstand what I’m saying!”

She corrected herself.

Well, huh... What am I supposed to do when you’re the one causing the misunderstandings...?

“Anyway. I’m counting on you in these negotiations.”

“I-I’ll try my best... Will you and Seras be coming too?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll help?”

“Of course.”

“Good. I’ll really be counting on you as well.”

“Sure. You can count on me.”

“I’m... I’m really relying on you two. I do mean it.”

Sounds like the prime minister of the Country at the End of the World, Liselotte Onik, has gotten better at asking the people around her for help. She’s better at asking their opinions now too, not just dogmatically ordering them around from on high. Another step in her development as a prime minister I guess.

I looked at her—and realized she wanted to ask me something.

“What’s up?”

“...Are you interested?”

“Hmm?”

“In my room—over there.”

“Well, I mean... You said it was pretty messy, right?”

I am kind of interested to see what kind of stuff she has in there—maybe this is the only room in the house that’s so plain.

“I-I said it was messy—b-but not *that* messy! I was just being modest earlier...”

“Well, hey, it’s not like I’m going to force you to show it to me.”

“Very well, then, there’s nothing else for it! Come with me!” She grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the door to her room.

“...I’d say it’s on the border between messy and not,” I said as I stepped inside.

“St-stop looking at everything!”

“But you’re the one that dragged me in here...”

“Gh... I-I suppose I am...”

Lise’s room is—well, there are a lot of clothes strewn about, lying right where she’s taken them off. I guess she probably just leaves them there and quickly gets changed into whatever she’s wearing next. Maybe she does a big load of laundry every once in a while?

Lise sat down on the bed, pouting and blushing red.

Come to think of it, I wonder how arachne lie down when they’re sleeping...

“Here, this is for you.”

I reached into my magic leather bag and pulled out a treat. Then I ripped open the paper packaging and took out one of the snacks inside, holding it under Lise’s nose.

“What is this thing...? *Sniff, sniff...* Hmm...? It smells somewhat sweet...” She wore a blank expression on her face.

“This is thanks for the food earlier. Don’t worry, it’s edible.”

In my hand I held a long, stick-shaped cookie coated in white chocolate.

“Wh-what’s this all of a sudden... Hmph,” said Lise—but she took the cookie all the same. “Hmm, well then... *Lick, lick...* Ah, it *is* sweet, I see... *Lick, lick...* I-it’s incredibly delicious, yes... Is the other world full of snacks like these? *Lick, lick...*”

“I can’t often get these, even in my world. I can’t exactly hand them out to everyone... So this is just our little secret, okay?”

“O-our secret... Hrmm...” She blushed disapprovingly and placed the tip of the cookie in her mouth.

“...Aren’t you going to eat it?”

“*Suck, suck...* Hm? I am eating it, aren’t I?”

“No, you’re supposed to bite into it.”

When you lick it like an ice cream, it just takes off all the chocolate coating and makes the cookie look kind of sad on its own.

About half the chocolate was already gone, and the cookie was covered in saliva. Lise crunched into the cookie itself and began munching on it.

“Ah... You’re right. These two flavors taste better when eaten together...”

“If word gets out, these things are going to be so popular, they could start a riot. This is our secret, just the two of us, you got that?”

“You said that already... *Munch...* Just the two of us, our little secret, right? Yes, I-I understand... It’s fine, okay...?”

Then finally, with a little chuckle and an ever so slight hint of irritation—Liselotte Onik gave me the most natural smile I’d ever seen her give.

When I got back to our room, Seras was waiting for me.

“Welcome back, Sir Too-ka.”

“...Thanks.”

I wonder if this is how adults feel when they get back from work.

I took off the mask I’d put on for the walk back from Lise’s room.

“I ate some food with Lise—she cooked.” I talked to Seras about everything that had happened in her room, avoiding the topics that would probably embarrass Lise.

“Mistress Lise... I think she’s quite a sensitive person,” Seras sat neatly on the edge of the bed.

“You’re right,” I said, taking off my robes. “Now that you mention it, I guess she is.”

Seras moved to stand up and take my robes, but I stopped her with a wave of

my hand. She smartly smoothed her skirt as she sat back down on the bed.

“That said, I think we can leave the negotiations to her. We’re going along too of course—but only because Lise invited us.”

I hung my robes on the back of a chair.

“It appears you’ve gained her trust.”

“Yeah, seems like it.”

I sat down at the desk and sighed. After a moment’s pause I picked up a quill and laid down a piece of paper.

“What are you writing, my master?” asked Seras.

“I’ve been anticipating some of Mira’s moves. I want to get them down in writing, along with some ways we might respond so I can hand it to Lise by noon tomorrow for review.”

I get the impression Lise isn’t the best in situations where she’s underprepared.

“But... Aren’t you tired?”

“I’m fine.”

Seras came to stand behind me and placed her hands gently on my shoulders.

“I think maybe you should rest a while.”

“After I’m done, sure.”

“No. I would like for you to rest *now*. It seems you are so tired that you have forgotten I am capable of telling the truth from lies.”

Ah, now I’ve done it. When she asked if I was tired, and I said I was fine... She knew that was a lie. I’m pretty worn out, it’s true, and I could have been evasive if I wanted to...

Seras is right—I just forgot she would see right through me.

“...Yeah. You’re right.”

“My apologies... I did not mean to overstep my bounds.”

“It’s fine. Thanks.”

I put my elbow on the back of the chair and turned around to face her. Seras's whole body froze up. She squeezed at her clothes and averted her eyes a little uncomfortably.

"A-ahem... You have a tendency to work beyond your own means, or perhaps it is a kind of compulsion of yours. But I think I may have a role in assisting you in this regard."

"How so?"

"W-well..."

Seras's cheeks blushed red, as if worried she had already gone too far. "Most people would never notice you were tired, Sir Too-ka. Perhaps because of your acting abilities... I believe most could not tell."

Come to think of it—she might be right. They can't see my face under the mask either, and with the voice-change crystal, it's hard to judge my tone as well.

"But you can tell, then, Seras?"

"I wish to be able to, yes."

"You're the companion I've spent the second most time with in this world after all."

I've spent a long time with Seras after coming to this world—second only to Piggymaru.

...No, Piggymaru's often in another room when we're sleeping, I guess. Slei, Nyaki, and Piggymaru are sleeping together even right now. So Seras and I do spend a lot more time together when it's just the two of us. Maybe I have spent the most time with her, after all.

"All right then."

I lay down on the bed with a thump.

"You're right—I'm really tired. I should get a little rest so I can think straight."

I didn't have the strength to take a bath—I felt like if I got too relaxed in there, I'd just collapse on the spot.

“But you’re resting too, okay? I’m not the only one who’s worn out. With all that command and fighting, you worked like a horse today.”

“But someone might come calling. If there’s nobody to answer the door, then...”

“I already told Lise her men can beat me awake if there’s an emergency. So you can sleep too, it’s fine.”

Especially if Yasu Tomohiro wakes up—Lise knows that.

I moved over a little on the bed to make space for Seras.

“You’re so tired... Does my presence not bother you here?”

“We’ve only got one bed. And hey, so long as you don’t mind it.”

Seras let slip a chuckle. “We’ve slept together so many times now have we not? I could not have done so if I minded.”

Seras came to stand right next to the bed. But a moment later she was hesitating, folding her hands under her armpits and looking down at her clothes.

“But... I have yet to change, so I may smell somewhat. I shall make do with sleeping at the desk or bench.”

“If you smell, then so do I, and you’ll rest better on the bed. And anyway, I’m so tired I don’t care about any of that right now.” I fought back a yawn.

Feels like now that I’ve lain down, my mind’s in sleep mode already... I can’t fight it any longer.

“V-very well. Th-then I shall lie on the bed. E-excuse the intrusion.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Seras folded her clothes underneath her as she sat on the edge of the bed. She turned her body and, lifting a strand of her hair from her eyes, looked at me.

“But first, as your vice-captain I would like to properly see you off to sleep. I won’t allow any cheating.”

I closed my eyes.

“What? Going to try and kiss me in my sleep again?” I said, half joking.

“I won’t do that again, you need not worry! When I would like to...I-I shall be sure to ask permission!”

Seras quickly denied my question and awkwardly blushed red with embarrassment.

“Wh-when it happened, I...I was quite embarrassed enough. P-please, if you would refrain from bringing it up...”

“It doesn’t really bother me, you know... But, sorry. I’ll make sure this is the last time I mention it...”

My eyes closed, and I drifted off to sleep.

When I woke up, the room was still dark.

...Not morning then.

From outside our room, however, I heard the bustling noises of everyday life.

They’re still ready for war out there.

I looked to my side and saw Seras asleep, slumped there over the desk like she’d dropped off in the middle of an all-night study session.

“...I can imagine what went through her head.”

I sighed and got up to walk over to her. I slid the piece of paper out from under her arms and looked down at it.

“Jeez... I knew it.”

This is the work I was halfway through doing last night. It completely slipped my mind... Seras used her spirit armor in the battle—meaning she offered up her desire for sleep to the spirits. She owes them. She knew that, which was why she carried on with my work. Once the time she owed them was paid, she gave in to sleep right there on the spot.

Seras knows the value of preparing Lise for tomorrow by giving her predictions—and she didn’t want to let me do it, given how tired I was. She was trying to share the load and reduce the amount of work I had to do.

“I get it.”

So that's why she saw me off to sleep.

“Sleep.”

I cast Sleep on Seras so as not to wake her, pulled the chair out from the desk, and took her in my arms. Her honey-blonde hair draped lightly over me. I looked down at her fair white face as she quietly breathed in and out as she slept.

“You're way too selfless, you know.”

Maybe when all of this is over... I should let her be selfish for once. I don't know what I'll be able to do for Seras when the time comes. But if there's something she wants—no matter how selfish or stubborn she is about it, I'll consider it.

“Sir... Too-ka... R-rest a... Little lon-ger... Please... Zzz... Zzz...”

She curled up in my arms, drawing her body closer towards me.

“Sleep talking, eh.”

So targets can't wake up, but they can still talk in their sleep during the effect.

“D-don't push y-yourself... Nh... Please... Mmnh... I-I shall... I wi-... Zzz...”

“You're even worrying about me in your dreams now?”

I guess she worries for me more than I thought.

I placed her gently on the bed and pulled the blanket up over her.

“Just get some rest for now.”

I glanced over at the desk, then back at the peaceful expression on Seras's face as she slept.

“Thanks, Seras.”

I left her sleeping there and immediately went to check on Yasu.

There were no reports while I was sleeping, but...

“He’s been fast asleep ever since we brought him in. I suppose he must not have been able to get rest on the road,” the centaur in charge of his care had reported to me before Seras and I had gone to bed. I had set up guards to take a watch rotation over him and ordered them to report to me as soon as he awoke—explaining to them that as a Hero from Another World, he was a high-priority target for interrogation.

But it sounds like, even now that Sleep’s duration has run out, he’s still out cold.

“We have treated what injuries we could... But many of them will never heal... Luckily, I don’t think they’ll cause him too many difficulties in his everyday life, though.”

If he wasn’t able to move at all, the Sixth Order would’ve had to carry him as luggage. It’s not “luck” that prevented him from suffering life-changing injuries—that was deliberate.

Okay. What are we going to do with him?

Sleep has already worn off, so I’d consider waking him up to check on him... But talking to him would mean removing that mouth restraint.

There’s the Ouija board... But if we’re going to use Seras’s lie-detecting abilities to their full potential, it’s best if we talk face-to-face. Given how tired she is, I want to let her rest a while longer. Talking to Yasu will have to wait. He can’t use his skills with that mouth restraint on, and he doesn’t have any weapons. If he wakes up and starts trying to get violent, we should be able to handle him.

“All right. I’ll be leaving him in your care for a while longer,” I said to the guard watching over Yasu. “I should be in the castle until the evening, so send a servant for me if he does wake up.”

Worse comes to worst, I can always restrain him with Paralyze.

And so I had a little time to kill before the negotiations with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor that evening.

I finally took a bath, and came out feeling refreshed, then went to see Munin and Nyaki before a strategy meeting with Seras about that evening’s

negotiations. We also had dinner with the Seven Lights, talking all the while.

Finally—it was evening.

“Almost time, eh?”

Yasu hadn’t woken up yet—I cast Sleep on him again as we left for the negotiations just in case. The cooldown for casting a skill on the same target twice had long since passed, so it worked fine.

He won’t wake up while the negotiations are in progress now, at least.

We made our preparations and left the Country at the End of the World. I rode Sleii, Seras was on a warhorse we acquired from the Thirteenth Order of Alion, and Lise rode Loa. The Bands of the Shining Leopard and Dragon came with us too. We borrowed several centaurs and harpies to serve as messengers for our mission, as well as a number of swift great wolves.

All of us were armed, of course—Lise had no objections to weaponry this time around. I left Kil in command of the rear guard military forces we had prepared just in case.

“You’re preparing reinforcements then?” Geo asked me.

“Yeah, in case anything happens. Given the terrain we can’t have them too close... But we’ve no need to show all our cards to the enemy either. I’m counting on your Band of the Shining Leopard.”

“I gotcha.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing... Was just thinkin’ that Lord of the Flies outfit suits you much better ’n the leopard one.”

I touched a hand to my mask and snorted at his comment. “I think so too.”

From the information we’ve got—the Wildly Beautiful Emperor has intel on the Lord of the Flies Brigade, and their soldiers probably know about us too.

Can’t stop people from talking, eh... Sooner or later, rumors are going to spread from those Mira soldiers that the Lord of the Flies is here and sided with

the Country at the End of the World. Some of the Alion knights must have slipped the net and gotten away too—those soldiers are going to talk about the things they saw here.

I considered using the fact that Foul Goddess wanted to recruit us to get close to Vicius—but that idea's off the table for now. It's possible she might invite us in, now that she knows that the Lord of the Flies Brigade allied with the Country at the End of the World, but given the current situation, it's likely to be a trap. Without definitive proof that the Goddess knows nothing of our alliance, it would be incredibly dangerous for us to try and approach her as an ally. Too risky.

And if the intel gets out that we've allied with the Country at the End of the World and the Empire of Mira—it might actually make our bonds with Mira stronger and make them more likely to help us. There are ways to make use of that, too.

The “Lord of the Flies Brigade” can keep on serving as a cloak of invisibility for Mimori Touka to hide beneath.

Fine by me.

The Lord of the Flies Brigade name is known far and wide now. But I'll bet there's almost nobody who cares about Mimori Touka—the boy who died right after his summoning.

...Well, that do-gooder class rep might remember my name from time to time. She talked about me when we met at the White Citadel of Protection, after all. That was a surprise. When I was about to be disposed of, I never thought she'd go against that Foul Goddess like she did.

“There's somethin' wrong with her, seriously.” I clicked my tongue. “...Freakin' do-gooder.”

“Sir Belzegea? Is something wrong?”

Seras rode beside me in the fly swordsman gear, her head tilted to the side.

“Nah,” I sighed. “I was just thinking if we had to fight someday... They might be the toughest enemy of all.”

“I agree... The Wildly Beautiful Emperor would be a fearsome foe.”

Probably best if I don't clarify what I meant. I suppose the lie-detector can't pick up on that.

“From what I've heard, he sounds like trouble,” I said.

I get the feeling he's going to be a tough one to negotiate with, given his character.

“It's coming into view now, Sir Belzegea.”

As Seras and I were talking, we arrived at the designated spot for our negotiations. It was a rocky area, which offered a good view of the surrounding land. There were few outcrops around but relatively little to block sight lines—it reminded me of the area in which we had fought the Sixth Order.

In this terrain, neither of our sides can really place reinforcements too close. Anyone launching a surprise attack is going to have to do it with whatever troops they bring to this meeting.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor was already waiting for us, in a simple camp he'd set up in the area. Among the soldiers in his camp, there was one group wearing particularly flashy, glittering armor.

Are those the Band of the Sun I've been hearing about?

There was a long table set up in the center of the camp.

He's prepared well.

We filed in slowly at their soldiers' signal. Lise's expression was completely frozen up with nerves. The Mira soldiers looked on as we passed with wonder in their eyes.

She's wearing her mask, but given the way they're eyeing her, I think they know that's Seras Ashrain under there.

A tall and handsome man greeted us with a respectful bow, like a butler bowing to his guests. There was a gentle air about the slim man—a certain softness to his blond hair and blue eyes that twinkled like gemstones. The smile on his lips was serene, but...

Not the kind of smile you should interpret as friendly.

In front of the golden-haired man sat a smaller one, his legs crossed lying back in his chair.

“And that’s the rumored Wildly Beautiful Emperor.”

He was beautiful—that was my first impression of him.

But that’s not all... He looks deceptive and cunning, like a fox.

But there’s something else...

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor gracefully stood from his chair.

“I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Emperor of Mira, Falkendotzine Mira DiAsordseat. Allow me to thank you for agreeing to these negotiations.”

There’s something more important...

As the emperor greeted us, I couldn’t help but have my attention drawn away in another direction. Towards faces I knew and I had seen before.

What the hell is she doing here...?

Ikusaba Asagi.

And the girl by her side... Kashima Kobato.

TAKAO ITSUKI

TAKAO HIJIRI finally collapsed to the forest floor.

She spit up blood—red pouring from the corners of her eyes.

“Aneki!”

Takao Itsuki rushed to catch her as she fell, taking her in her arms.

“Let me sleep.”

For a moment, Itsuki hesitated—but did as she was told, laying her older

sister on the ground. There were no presences around. It was just the two of them.

Just as it always has been.

“Please, run. I thought I could fight through this, but...” Her voice was weak.

I don't want her to speak any more.

But I want to hear her voice.

The conflicting emotions were tearing Itsuki apart. Hijiri closed her eyes and placed a hand on her chest.

“I never thought...she would poison me...”

We'll disappear together. The Goddess won't be able to let an S-class hero who rebelled against her live... But Hijiri can come up with our next plan while we're in hiding, and...

“I never expected the Goddess's hidden blade w-would be poisoned...”

The poison had entered through the wound she'd left in Hijiri's stomach.

She always said lots of countries forbade the use of poisons and that it was Alion's orders that made things that way. They forbid the trade and dissemination of such things—Alion and Yonato being particularly strict about it—but the other countries too have bans in place, right?

“Banning all poisons while at the same time assembling all the knowledge and technology for yourself. Hoarding it... That's what it means for something to be *forbidden* to that Goddess. So even if there's a new type of poison made... She'll never create an antidote... Never allow word of it to spread.”

With even their possession forbidden across the continent—poisons could never be researched.

Hijiri slowly opened her eyes.

“Anyone who has knowledge of this new poison, or knows how to make an antidote, can use that t-to their own advantage...”

Like killing someone with a poison that can't be treated... Or extorting them for an antidote...

The Goddess wants to monopolize the use of poison for her own gain. That's why she's made such strict rules about brewing and owning them... So nobody else has the knowledge necessary to counter her.

But there has to be an antidote. We can go find it.

No...this poison is slow acting. Her symptoms have only shown up now we've gotten far from the capital. I can use my healing spells on her, but they won't do anything to stop the poison.

Itsuki pounded the ground with her fist.

"But we've come so far! This can't be happening! Come on...!" Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. "This can't b-be?! Hey, Aneki?! Do something, like you always do—like, something that'll bring this whole thing back from the edge and—"

"Itsuki." Hijiri stared up at the sky as she spoke. "Listen closely to what I'm about to tell you."

"...A-Aneki?"

"This is as far as I go."

N-no...!

"But...I don't regret rebelling against the Goddess. Even if I was wrong..."

"Aneki..."

"Life is just a series of choices. Whether the choices I've made were right or wrong...that remains to be seen. I can make predictions, but there are fluctuations in the observed results, deviations. A different *reality* to the one for which I made my plans. In the end, there is nothing we can do but roll the dice and hang everything on how it falls. Yet..."

Hijiri gently raised her hand and touched Itsuki's cheek.

"We can increase the odds of landing on the number we want."

"Anekiii..."

"That's what it means to do everything one can."

"Y-yeah... Yeah!"

“Without that black sphere—that miscalculation—I could have been victorious. But well... That’s just another excuse, isn’t it? The ones who are going to defeat her now...will be all of you.”

Hijiri told Itsuki everything, trusting it all to her before the flame of life burned out within her. She spoke of Sogou Ayaka as well.

“Ayaka will be fine. She knows nothing of my betrayal, and the Goddess should understand that.”

“Then what about the note you gave her...?”

“I simply wrote her some instructions on what to do if I did not return, and some information I thought might prove useful to her. I gave no specifics. All that remains...is how she herself chooses to act.” Hijiri continued, her eyes never turning toward Itsuki. “I wanted to make absolutely sure she wouldn’t be caught up in all this....Right up until the last moment, I wasn’t sure whether to tell her or not.”

“S-so I... You want me to go and see the class rep, then?!”

“Yes. Choose your moment carefully... And tell her...tell Sogou-san... everything I just told you... And...”

Hijiri paused.

“Give her my thanks... And, tell her I’m sorry... I’d like you to tell her that.”

She spit up more blood. Itsuki held her sister up to stop it from clogging her throat.

“It’s okay... Even without the Goddess, we...we can go back...” Hijiri’s breathing was shallow.

When was the last time I saw her so weak?

No—that doesn’t matter.

This is the last time... The last time I’ll see her like this.

“A-Aneki... P-please, wait... I can’t do it...alone, I just can’t! I need you with me... Aneki?!”

With a smile of complete relief—Hijiri relaxed all her weight onto Itsuki’s

chest where she lay.

“Itsuki, you really are...” She closed her eyes. “...my one and only. The best little sister in the world.”

“Onee-chan!” She couldn’t bear it any longer. “N-no, you can’t! W-wait! Without you... Onee-chan, without you, I...I can’t do anything without you?! Hey?! Without you...I... What do I do?!”

“...It’s okay. I know you can do this... You’re my sister...”

“O-Onee-chan?! Y-you can’t die! No, no! No, I said no...!”

Itsuki sobbed openly—didn’t care who might be listening. She clung to her older sister, as Hijiri herself was clinging to life—both holding on as tightly as they could.

But this time, Hijiri didn’t scold her. Instead, she smiled kindly and just gazed up at her little sister with that serene look in her eyes.

“The rest....is up to you, Itsuki.”

“Onee-chan?”

Hijiri took Itsuki’s hand.

She’s weak. Is this really her hand in mine?

She tried to squeeze, and Itsuki squeezed back.

“Then...at the very end at least...let’s be like sisters, shall we...? Say goodbye... do it properly...”

“Y-Yeah... O-okay! Okay, Aneki... I-I don’t want it to end in some weird way, I won’t let it! S-so...”

“Itsuki.”

“Y-yeah...”

“The years you’ve spent by my side...I’m so content... I enjoyed our time together.”

“—Y-yeah! Me too, Aneki...!”

“We’ll always be together, even when I’m gone... Right?”

“Y-yeah... You’re right! I won’t forget you until the day I die... I won’t... I promise...”

They stayed together like that for a while. They were at peace—two sisters in a world of their own, a place in which nobody else could touch them.

Just the two of us—just like it’s always been.

They spoke of the past.

That time, and this time—memories of their years together.

“...Hey, Aneki? You’re still there, right? ...Aneki?”

“...Yes.”

“H-ha ha... G-good... D-don’t scare me like that...”

“Perhaps it’s because of m-my stats...as a hero...”

It was so quiet.

“I love you, Aneki.”

“As I love you, Itsuki.”

“...”

“...”

“...Aneki? Wh-what’s wrong?”

“My eyes...”

“Eh?”

“I can’t see... I can’t see anything.”

“...Right.”

“Itsuki.”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you... With you here, I—I’m not afraid to die. I’m sure this is what it’s like...to die happy.”

“...Yeah.”

“And... I’m sorry. And...j-just one more time...thank you.”

“Y-yeah... Yeah...”

“Itsuki?”

“Eh?”

Takao Itsuki was always looking to her older sister—only ever in her direction.

She couldn’t see anything else in that moment... But then, her eyes started to take in her surroundings—the blurry outlines of shapes around her.



The rain fell heavy on the deep forest, pummeling the dead golden-eyed monster corpses which littered the ground nearby.

“You—”

Then there was a leopardman standing before her—one she had seen before.

She just called my name—she’s...

“Eve... S-Speed?”

“What are you two doing in a place like this?”

Fleeing the capital, the sisters had not tried to join the Wildly Beautiful Emperor—Hijiri knew that the Goddess would be watching the road to Mira closely.

There was only one path for us to take. A perfect place to hide...somewhere dangerous. And like she said, if we met “her,” she might turn into a powerful ally.

The forbidden land, home to the Forbidden Witch—that was where Takao Hijiri had placed all their hopes... The Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

There, in that dark forest, the two heroes found themselves reunited in the most extraordinary way with the leopardman bloodsport gladiator...Eve Speed.

Epilogue

KASHIMA KOBATO'S UNIQUE SKILL was Disclose—and it had a few quite unique characteristics when it came to the stats of other heroes. The heroes could display their stats by speaking the words “status open” and looking at the status window which that command revealed. Usually, only the heroes themselves were able to view this screen—but there were two exceptions.

Firstly, the Goddess was able to see the status screens when they were open. Secondly, she was capable of giving temporary viewing permission to those she wished. These were the only methods by which someone other than a hero could see a hero's stats unless the verbal command was spoken. Otherwise the screen would not even be displayed, and that information was usually reserved for nobody but the hero themselves.

This quirk of the heroes' stat screens had been troubling Asagi and her group for some time.

One of Ikusaba Asagi's unique skills was Queen Bee—a skill capable of enhancing the abilities of her fellow classmates by increasing their stats. Some of the other heroes had common skills capable of improving their stats, but Asagi's buffs were far and beyond the best. With Queen Bee applied to her group, they could perform much stronger attacks than their rank would typically allow. This of course, was only true while the effect was applied. Asagi's group had no A-class heroes or above, and once her buff wore off, they would all return to their regular stats.

Asagi had also gained the ability to stack her buffs on targets, making the effect even stronger than it had been before. What bothered her was that it seemed her unique skill's buff had longer or shorter durations depending on the target. This made it incredibly difficult to know when she should reapply it and to which targets. She could stack buffs on one target but could not refresh the duration of their effects until all of them had worn off—meaning she had no choice but to wait for that to happen before using her skill again.

This issue was constantly on her mind.

Asagi's group wasn't a small one. Even she struggled to understand and manage them all at once. Most difficult of all, was that she had to rely on them to self-report when their buffs had run out. Asagi was of course unable to see her fellow heroes' stat screens, and so each hero in the field had to check their own during the battle and call out to her once their buff had faded.

This system was trouble. People were constantly checking their stats while in combat, which slowed their movements and forced them to prioritize defense. It was also their only option, however, because the risk of death skyrocketed the moment the buffs wore off. In the worst-case scenario, some heroes would become too absorbed in the battle, too focused on their enemies, and continue to fight without noticing that their buffs had dropped. One girl had barely escaped serious injury for that very reason.

Kashima Kobato had developed her unique skill, *Disclose*, just as Asagi was grappling with this issue. The skill allowed her to see the stats of the other heroes around her.

When Kobato used her skill, a transparent stat display would appear above each heroes' head, visible only to her. She was also able to expand the windows to make them easier for her to read.

This unique skill worked in perfect tandem with Asagi's buffs. First, it almost entirely eliminated the need for the heroes in Asagi's group to self-report that their buffs were about to wear off—Kobato could just give that information to Asagi when necessary. The heroes no longer needed to worry about buff durations and could focus on the fight—and Asagi would reapply buffs to those that Kobato reported were in need of them.

Asagi herself said that it put less stress on her than the previous system had. Her group moved faster in combat than they ever had before, and with Asagi's unique skill developing as well, their combat strength was higher than it ever had been. Strong enough even to do battle against a fearsome enemy like the Ninth Order.

"Hey, Kobacchan, let's go check out the meeting." Ikusaba Asagi called from outside her tent.

“Eh? You mean...”

“Yeah, the tea party with those beastfolk!”

“I-I’m fine... I’d only be in the way if I was there...”

It’s not just that. Those kinds of situations make me nervous.

“I asked Zine-chin, and he said it’s cool if I bring you along too, Pidgey!”

“Eh...”

I’ve already given up on asking you to stop calling me Pidgey... But calling the emperor “Zine-chin” like that... There are limits to how rude you can be, Asagi-san...

“Ah, Ziney’s comin’ too, y’know?”

“I see...”

“Hmh? You ain’t like, totally in L-O-V-E with the Zinester like all the other girls, huh, Kobacchan? I figured you’d be into guys like him.”

“Ehh? But you don’t seem interested in him either, Asagi-san.”

“Yeah, I mean... He’s so freakin’ boring to talk to.”

“A-Asagi-san, you can’t!” She placed a finger to her own lips in a shushing motion and put her other hand over Asagi’s mouth. “The people of Mira really respect their emperor! You can’t talk about him like that!”

“Mfhfhf.”

When Kobato took her hand away, Asagi exhaled dramatically and took in big gulps of air.

“Whoo~... Sure ’bout that? I’ve been being pretty rude to everyone this whole time, but nothin’ bad’s happened to me yet, meow!”

“I... I’m scared someone from Mira is going to stab you, Asagi-san...”

Kobato was terrified to even betray the Goddess in the first place—but Asagi had been sure of her decision.

Back then, Zine-san appeared before us in Yonato. Right after Asagi talked with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor alone, she had such a clear certainty in her

eyes. Some guarantee of victory.

Everyone in Asagi's group knew that it was her that had kept them alive. They had suffered no fatalities—nor even any casualties so serious as to take any of the heroes in their group out of the fight.

Not to mention when she says we're all going to get safely back to the old world, she believes in that. It makes me feel like I can believe it too. I don't feel like she's just fallen for Zine-san's charms or that's the only reason we're helping him either. I...I actually find Zine-san a little scary. There's nothing reassuring about his presence. I never feel calm when he's in the room...

What Kobato valued most of all in a person was how reassured they could make her feel—and one of the people who really could was Sogou Ayaka.

I wish I could see the class rep again...

She was scared to have betrayed the Goddess—but what terrified her most was what Ayaka might think of what they had done.

"C'mon, enough grumbling! Let's go!"

"Y-yeah... Okay."

In the end, she left her tent to join Asagi at the meeting spot.

They arrived and lined up by one of the camp's cloth curtains to wait.

Ehh... This atmosphere is making me nervous already...

Kobato had always hated ceremonial occasions—even the strict events held in the school gymnasium where they all had to line up and listen. They made her nervous, too.

Asagi by contrast, was lazily yawning as they waited for their guests to arrive.

"They have arrived!" One of the soldiers shouted his report to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

They're here, then. The Country at the End of the World... They're a country of demi-humans, I think? And there's a group of people called the Lord of the Flies Brigade coming as well...

They filed into the camp one by one.

Wow... That one's half spider, and there's a big black panther man! Oh...I've seen beastmen before, but so many all in one place...

“Whoa~, suddenly we're in a fantasy world, huh?”

Asagi put her hand to her forehead to get a better view—she looked like she was enjoying herself.

Ah...

Kobato's eyes settled on the space above Asagi's head. It had been two hours now since she checked her classmates' stats. One of her jobs in the group was to perform regular stat checks and keep notes on their numbers.

Ah... I forgot to turn off my unique skill...

The amount of MP her skill consumed was very small—she had once accidentally left it turned on for a whole day without realizing, but she still had MP remaining when it came time for bed. That was why she sometimes just forgot to turn it off.

Kobato sighed in self-reproach.

Haah... I shouldn't waste money on things just because they're cheap—it's the same principle. I need to stop being so forgetful all the time...

Disclose only affected heroes, not the other-worlders around her, so the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had no stat display above his head. The crowd of soldiers around her began to murmur, just faint whispers at first. Kobato knew exactly what it was that had caught their attention.

I see, so that's...the most beautiful woman in the world, Seras Ashrain-san. I hope I can get a look beneath her mask while she's here, just once at least...

Riding before her was a black steed, with a man wearing a fly mask sitting astride it.

That must be the Lord of the Flies...the leader of their brigade.

“...Eh?!” Kobato's eyes opened wide.

She looked down for a moment and placed a hand to her mouth, barely conscious of what she was doing.

That's right—Kashima Kobato had not turned off Disclose.

Wh-why...? Eh? Why...

Why is there a stat display above the Lord of the Flies' head?

Afterword

IN THIS EIGHTH VOLUME, I feel like I was able to put in play a lot of the ideas that have been piling up in my mind for some time. Back in the fifth volume, I wrote that the nature of the book made it a little longer than the others—and this volume has reached quite the page count for the same reason. But, well, I think I've been able to include a real variety of different scenes for its size (though I suppose with this much crammed in, you'd expect us to put some in the next volume, or even split this one in two).

As for the extra scenes included in this printed version, I think I've been especially able to draw out more of the growing trust between Seras and Touka in the latter half (in the web version, the scene ended with Touka leaving Lise's room). Pacing is important, but I like to dig deeper into Seras as a character in this published edition, putting her front and center where possible (and where page counts allow). That's why I chose to include that new scene. I hope you enjoyed some of the new passages where I tried to bring out aspects of the other characters as well.

This eighth volume has also been a book of changes, where the characters have shifted their positions considerably. In some sections, people are fighting to the death; in others, settling matters for good; and in yet others, deepening their relationships with each other. As an author, I hope some of these scenes spoke to you and will remain with you even after you put the book down.

I'd like to move on to acknowledgments now. Thank you (and sorry) to my editor O-sama, for always accommodating my detailed requests and hang-ups with regards to this work. To KWKM-sama, thank you for bringing Lise to life with your illustrations, and for all the other amazing drawings that are in this volume. They can have such impact, can sometimes be so beautiful, at others so cute... Your work adds such color to the characters.

To Keyaki Uchiuchi-sama and Sho Uyoshi-sama, I always look forward to reading your drafts and new chapters of the manga version of this work (and I also enjoy them a lot). Thank you as well to everybody who helped bring this

eighth volume to print.

To the readers of the web version of this work, thank you for accompanying me this far. I hope you'll continue to see both the web version and this printed edition of *Failure Frame* work safely to its conclusion.

And lastly...thank you for picking up this book and continuing to read all the way through this eighth volume. I understand now more than ever how much the support of all those who buy and support the *Failure Frame* books means to me.

Well, then, I hope we meet in the next volume—where who knows what enemies our heroes will be up against next?

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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